



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)
and
**JOURNAL OF
PROCEEDINGS**

Volume 128
(27 April 2020 to 8 June 2020)

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Assembly Members

A

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Mrs Martina (Foyle)
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)

B

Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Blair, John (South Antrim)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)

C

Cameron, Ms Pam (South Antrim)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)

D

Dallat, John (East Londonderry) (*until 5 May 2020*)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)

E

Easton, Alex (North Down)
Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)

F

Flynn, Ms Órlaithí (West Belfast)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)

G

Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)

H

Hargey, Ms Deirdre (South Belfast)
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry) (*from 19 May 2020*)

I

Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)

K

Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Ms Catherine (West Tyrone)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)

L

Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)

M

McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
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McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
McHugh, Maoliosa (West Tyrone)
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Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)

N

Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)

O

O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)

P

Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)

R

Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Rogan, Ms Emma (South Down)

S

Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Miss Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
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W

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Minister for Infrastructure.....	Ms Nichola Mallon
Minister for the Economy.....	Mrs Diane Dodds
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Administration.....	Conor McCourt

Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 28 April 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I wish to advise Members that we will suspend the sitting at 10:50 am to make preparations to observe a minute's silence in the Chamber in honour of those front-line workers who have lost their life in their efforts to save others during this pandemic.

Before we commence business, I also wish to advise Members that the Speaker has asked me to record that he has written to extend condolences to our former colleagues, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson and Oliver McMullan, who have both experienced close family bereavements this week. The Speaker has also given me leave to say a few words about the passing of Mr Charlie Poots.

Charlie Poots was born in 1929 and reared in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Although a farmer, he did not come from the landed interest and had to work very hard for everything that he ever owned. He stood for the old Northern Ireland Parliament in 1969 and was elected to Stormont in 1973 and 1975. Charlie faithfully served the people of Lisburn for 24 years on Lisburn council and rose to the office of deputy mayor.

Speaking as a DUP Assembly Member, I can say truthfully that but for the vision of people such as Charlie Poots and Ian Paisley, I would not be here. I wish to take this opportunity to extend my deepest sympathy to Angela and Joy, and to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots, on the passing of his father.

Mr Poots: Thank you for the opportunity to reply briefly. First, I extend my sympathies to my friend and colleague Jeffrey Donaldson on the loss of his father and to Oliver McMullan, whose daughter has passed away. It is hugely tragic when a young person loses their life. I know that all our sympathies are with Oliver at this time in going through the trauma that his family are going through.

I thank God for my mother and father and for the start that they gave me in life. It was not always easy and we did not always have lots of money or anything like that, but I had a really good start in life because I had good parents. As you indicated, he did not come from a big-house unionist background. He was a conviction politician, although he was a farmer first.

You can be thankful that you have me to deal with, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and not him, because he could be a little more fiery than me. I know that, on at least one occasion, he used unparliamentary language. On another occasion, Michael Heseltine was not the first to grab a mace. That was done by Professor Kennedy Lindsay, who

leapt onto the Table that used to be in the centre of this room, and a mass brawl broke out between the Members. I know that dad was front, middle and centre of that, on that occasion. Dr Paisley always related a particular story about how he lost a button in the fray, and he got my sister to sew the button on. He had found it on the floor. Then my mother wondered why there was an odd button on his coat, so it was somebody else's button that had been found, and Dr Paisley always took great heart in telling that story.

One thing that I have often thought as I pass through the Lobby and see the death plates that are up there in memory of murdered colleagues is that dad could have been one of those, because, in 1976, the INLA attempted to murder him as he left Allam's market. The bullet hit the door of the car — the front, driver's door — and he narrowly avoided being murdered. I have to say that, as a young lad of 11, at that stage, I was quite bitter about that for many years. I watched my dad as he mixed and mingled with many people from the Roman Catholic community, which I had a personal bitterness about, as I was blaming an entire community for the foolish actions of a small number of individuals, and how he dealt with that in such a gracious way. He worked very closely with people and held no bitterness, and that enabled me to overcome the bitterness that was in my heart that should not have been there in the first place. I will say this: bitterness burns up the individuals who are bitter, but it does not do any harm to the people whom they are bitter about. There is a lesson to be learned there for all of us.

Dad lived a long life. Although his health was not so good in his latter years, he had a good life. He had a prosperous life, one that was successful in so many areas. I thank God for him, and I thank you for your acknowledgement of him this morning, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Executive Committee Business

Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, to move the Consideration Stage.

Moved. — [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments, detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list.

There is a single group of amendments, amendment Nos 1 to 14, which deal with support for tenants and Assembly oversight, and we will debate the amendments in turn. The group includes amendments on an extension of the notice to quit period, retrospectivity, draft affirmative procedure and rent waiver.

Once the group debate is completed, the other amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clause 1 (Notice to quit: private tenancies)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now come to the single group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2 to 14.

Members should note that amendment Nos 8 and 12 are consequential to amendment No 1. Therefore, if amendment No 1 is not made, I will not call amendment Nos 8 and 12. Amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6 are consequential to amendment No 3. Therefore, if amendment No 3 is not made, I will not call amendment Nos 4, 5 or 6. Amendment Nos 10 and 11 are consequential to amendment No 9. Therefore, if amendment No 9 is not made, I will not call amendment Nos 10 and 11.

Mr Carroll: I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 1, line 5, leave out from “12” to “weeks” on line 6 and insert “1 year”.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In page 1, line 9, leave out from “with” to “Assent” on line 10 and insert “21 April 2020”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 3: In page 1, line 11, leave out “with 30 September 2020” and insert

“1 year after the date of Royal Assent”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 4: In page 1, line 12, leave out from “date” to “date” on line 13 and insert

“length of time specified in subsection (2)(b) to another specified length of time”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 5: In page 1, line 15, leave out “date” and insert “length of time”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 6: In page 1, line 16, leave out “date” and insert “length of time”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 7: In page 1, line 18, leave out from “with” to “Assent” on line 19 and insert “21 April 2020”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 8: In clause 2, page 2, line 4, leave out “12 weeks” and insert “1 year”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 9: In clause 2, page 2, line 5, after “to” insert “a further”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 10: In clause 2, page 2, line 6, after “than” insert “a further”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 11: In clause 2, page 2, line 10, after “than” insert “a further”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 12: In clause 2, page 2, line 12, leave out “12 weeks” and insert “1 year”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 13: In clause 2, page 2, line 22, leave out “are subject to negative resolution” and insert

“may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly”.— [Mr Carroll.]

No 14: New Clause

After clause 2 insert —

“Rent waiver

2A. A private tenant may request from their landlord a waiver in rent if they have been financially impacted as a result of coronavirus, as defined in the Coronavirus Act 2020 (s.1), during the emergency period.”.— [Mr Carroll.]

Mr Carroll: I am glad to have the opportunity today to strengthen this necessary legislation to protect renters during the pandemic. Indeed, that is the aim of each of my amendments.

No one in this Chamber will be, or should be, uninformed about the crisis that renters are facing, particularly those who are low-paid workers, who have lost their job as a result of coronavirus, or who are students who have had to leave their student rental to isolate in family homes and are now being forced to continue to pay for a tenancy for many months, despite no longer living there. Unfortunately, we have heard disgraceful stories of healthcare workers being evicted with 24 hours’ notice by their landlords for fear that they might carry the virus. Whilst most people are out clapping for and praising our NHS workers, some are shockingly trying to capitalise on this crisis. Distressingly, we have also heard stories in which a Belfast estate agent, confident that it cannot obtain rent from its student renters, has sought to recoup the money from the renters’ guarantors. This is shocking behaviour, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. While landlords can obviously avail themselves of mortgage and rates relief, some have seen the current crisis as an opportunity to extract more from their renters, and we should all condemn such shameful behaviour.

I want to stress, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that even if all the amendments that I move here today are accepted, the legislation will not go far enough, in my view, to protect those renters that I have mentioned. It would be a good start, for sure, but there needs to be urgent, strong legislation to ensure that those who no longer have a need for a property can end their tenancy contract early, and also that those who have been financially affected by the crisis are given a waiver of their rent. It would be better, moreover, if the Chamber would waive rents completely for this period. It is not so outlandish at this time; indeed, measures such as this have been taken elsewhere to protect the vulnerable. Another possible workaround could be to cap rents at

housing benefit levels and extend housing benefits to those who have been affected by the crisis, so as to pay their rent. I would appreciate it if the Minister could clarify whether Stormont has the ability to cap rents and whether she herself is in favour of that measure.

Moving on to the particulars of the amendments that I am moving today, I want to be clear that, without a rent waiver or rent cap in place, my aim is to limit the number of evictions during this period as far as possible. While we are asking people to stay at home to prevent the spread of this virus, we should do whatever we can to ensure that they have a home to stay in, for their own safety and the safety of their community and our health workers, and to prevent hospitals from breaching their capacity. Not only would a person evicted during this period lose their ability to isolate, but their means to find a new home would obviously be seriously restricted by social-distancing protocols and by the probability that they will have found themselves in financial hardship because of this crisis.

It is highly unlikely that we will have fully lifted the social-distancing protocols, the advice to stay at home or the advice that all non-essential staff should stay at home within the next 12 weeks. Indeed, it would be profoundly dangerous, based on the World Health Organization's advice, to do so. We have heard that a vaccine for COVID-19 may not be available until next year, and we know that it is very likely that we will have a second wave of this virus. Therefore, while the three-month extension in the Bill is certainly welcome, it unfortunately does not go far enough.

The Irish Government, the British Government and other Governments around the world, along with Chief Medical Officers and the World Health Organization, estimate that COVID-19 and the measures necessary to prevent its spread will probably be with us into 2021. We must ensure not only that we are adhering to that advice, but that we have protections for renters for as long as those COVID-19 measures are in place. That is why amendment No 1 seeks to extend the eviction notice period to one year. Amendment Nos 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 allow for that change to apply thematically throughout the legislation. This Bill, without that amendment of the applicable period, would allow landlords the possibility to begin evictions in July, or shortly after.

The next aim of my amendments is to allow renters who receive an eviction notice during the time between this Bill's introduction and when it is given Royal Assent to avail themselves of the extended notice period.

That is a simple enough measure. It would allow as many renters as possible to avail themselves of the new protections and allow us to implement them as early as possible. Unless there are robust guidelines in place that cover renters for the period just before the legislation is finally implemented, renters are left exposed. Legally speaking, their landlord could begin eviction proceedings, which would be to the detriment of vulnerable renters, students and people in low-paid jobs. For that reason, amendment No 2 seeks to extend the notice period retrospectively back to the date on which the Bill was published. Amendment Nos 8 to 12 allow for that amendment to apply thematically throughout the legislation.

10.45 am

The final amendment, amendment No 13, aims to inject greater democracy into the legislative process. If accepted,

it will mean that new legislation relating to exceptions to the extended notice period would have to be voted on in the House. The Bill currently does not stipulate that.

It is imperative that MLAs be allowed to scrutinise properly and improve the measures in the Bill by way of a positive vote in the Chamber, in order to ensure that the necessary oversight and accountability is possible. At a time when states have been imbued with far-reaching powers, we must ensure that democracy is not encroached on at any stage in the Assembly, especially when COVID-19 measures are being implemented. Indeed, we should strive to guarantee as much oversight and accountability as is possible during these unprecedented times. Throughout this crisis, my party has always called for maximum democracy and scrutiny.

If new guidelines are to be implemented in legislation, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, surely Members should have the opportunity to debate, discuss and, if necessary, amend them. The measures will affect a lot of my constituents and the constituents of many others in the House, so surely we should settle for nothing less than maximum scrutiny at this time.

I will end my comments there and commend amendment Nos 1 to 13 to the House. For your reference, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will not be moving amendment No 14.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member. I had said that we would suspend the sitting at around 10.50 am to allow parties to make arrangements to observe the minute's silence for front-line workers. It is now 10.47 am, so, by leave of the Assembly, I think that we should suspend now, until 11.05 am. That will give people time to put their arrangements in place.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 10.47 am.

On resuming —

Debate resumed on amendment No 1, which amendment was:

In page 1, line 5, leave out from "12" to "weeks" on line 6 and insert "1 year".— *[Mr Carroll.]*

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In page 1, line 9, leave out from "with" to "Assent" on line 10 and insert "21 April 2020".— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 3: In page 1, line 11, leave out "with 30 September 2020" and insert

"1 year after the date of Royal Assent".— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 4: In page 1, line 12, leave out from "date" to "date" on line 13 and insert

"length of time specified in subsection (2)(b) to another specified length of time".— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 5: In page 1, line 15, leave out "date" and insert "length of time".— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 6: In page 1, line 16, leave out "date" and insert "length of time".— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 7: In page 1, line 18, leave out from "with" to "Assent" on line 19 and insert "21 April 2020".— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 8: In clause 2, page 2, line 4, leave out “12 weeks” and insert “1 year”.— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 9: In clause 2, page 2, line 5, after “to” insert “a further”.— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 10: In clause 2, page 2, line 6, after “than” insert “a further”.— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 11: In clause 2, page 2, line 10, after “than” insert “a further”.— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 12: In clause 2, page 2, line 12, leave out “12 weeks” and insert “1 year”.— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 13: In clause 2, page 2, line 22, leave out “are subject to negative resolution” and insert

“may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly”.— *[Mr Carroll.]*

No 14: New Clause

After clause 2 insert —

“Rent waiver

2A. A private tenant may request from their landlord a waiver in rent if they have been financially impacted as a result of coronavirus, as defined in the Coronavirus Act 2020 (s.1), during the emergency period.”.— *[Mr Carroll.]*

Ms P Bradley: Today I speak as a member of the Democratic Unionist Party and not as Chair of the Committee for Communities. The Committee has not had time to scrutinise these amendments, so I cannot give a Committee response on them. In saying that, Mr Carroll brought up the point about scrutiny and lack of scrutiny. As a Committee, we were in agreement that we would very much like to have more scrutiny on this, and I certainly would like to have had more scrutiny on your amendments. Sadly, that was not possible, but I know that the times that we are living in have made all of these things not possible. We have had to rush through legislation, and I think that the crux of that is that the legislation has to be proportional. I believe that the legislation as it stands is proportional to where we are at the moment, and, in the Bill, there are two clauses that will allow for the Bill to be altered.

I had a small debate with some other Members about amendment No 13. The Bill allows for this to be brought back to the Committee for it to extend it or whatever the case might be. You said that you would prefer it to be the Assembly as well as the Committee that look at this. In normal times, I would be saying that I wholeheartedly agree with that. My only concern is that we could be in the middle of summer recess by then, not that I think that summer recess will be like any other summer recess that we have had before. My only concern is that we would have to wait a further length of time to give notice or whatever else for the Assembly to reconvene.

I thank the Member for highlighting some of the issues that we spoke about when we the Committee was briefed by officials. I know that there are a lot of people who are going through some really bad financial uncertainty at this time, and there are many people who have lost their jobs. I would like to think that a safety net is in place to help those people when it comes to housing benefit, and the Member did bring up a very good point around housing benefit and the

rates cap. Not all private rentals are of the same level as housing benefit, so maybe the Minister could address that.

I have been lobbied and have been contacted by various people in my constituency. Quite a lot of them are from the group who have been furloughed at 80% of their pay, and they have contacted their landlords to ask for a 20% reduction in their rent. Landlords have said no to that, which I think is scandalous. I think that it is absolutely dreadful that landlords have not responded to these people who, through no fault of their own, have been put on furlough and on reduced wages. I think that we need to encourage landlords to do that, and we need to be saying that, as part of this, landlords have a responsibility to people who want to pay their rent, albeit at a reduced rate.

I also feel for that age group. We know that, in today’s times, a lot of children, including mine, do not leave home until much later, so they are living with their parents. However, we have a cohort of those between approximately the ages of 25 to 35 years who have left home and are in private rentals because, although they are saving, they cannot afford the 20% deposit to buy a house. It worries me that they have lost their jobs. They will have savings that they have worked really hard to build up for a deposit and that is seen as savings when they apply for housing benefit.

In all the legislation that has been passed here in recent weeks, there are swings and roundabouts. There are people who will benefit, but there are others who will fall through the cracks, and it will be much more difficult for them.

I am also a little bit concerned about extending the period, given that the so-called mortgage holiday is set at three months and if it does not continue. There are many good landlords. Many of them help their tenants and are actively speaking to them and have good relationships. I know that there are many bad landlords as well, and that people are living in some really horrendous conditions in some private rentals. I worry about those landlords who have to pay buy-to-rent mortgages. When those mortgages have to be paid again because the mortgage holiday is over, if we were to run this any longer, we could end up with repossession by the banks in respect of those buy-to-rent mortgages.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. She raises a very important point. Would she agree that it is important that the Bill allows for the flexibility for this House to react as and when the situation develops? You mentioned potential changes to mortgage interest rates etc. It is important that the House maintains control and the ability to act as this situations unfolds.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention and I absolutely agree. I think that it is important that the Bill allows us to react, to extend this and to make those decisions going forward.

I will make another point, which a Member raised and on which I have been lobbied, about student rents. I know that that does not fall wholly under the Department for Communities. Many students will have left their rental properties and are now living back with their parents, but there are others who are living in their student accommodation. It is their main place of residence and they have no choice, whether they are overseas students or students who do not have a home to go back to. We need to protect them so that they cannot face eviction, and

that needs to be done in collaboration with the Department for the Economy, because I know that it does not lie fully at the door of Minister Hargey.

I agree with the Member's sentiment. I get it absolutely and I know that he is trying his very best to look out for the most vulnerable people in our community, but I would like to think that when we come to near the end of the 12-week period, this will be brought back to the Committee, where we can look at it again and, if it needs to be extended beyond that, we will take that proportionate approach.

Ms Ennis: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, let us just call a spade a spade. What we have in these amendments is unnecessary time-wasting. We have all become depressingly familiar with "Publicity before People's" self-aggrandising brand of politics, but to use the passage of this Bill, which is designed to protect those in the private rented sector during the biggest health emergency in a generation, for their own propaganda purposes, is reprehensible.

Proposing amendments that are legislatively redundant, are highly susceptible to successful legal challenge or are outside the legislative competence of the Assembly tells me, quite frankly, that Mr Carroll has not done his homework. We spent considerable time in the Chamber last week arguing the need for the Bill to pass, and to pass quickly — that must happen so that the protections within it become effective now, when they are needed. To not support the Bill, or worse, to cynically delay it in an attempt to gain some perceived political advantage, will put lives in danger. That cannot, and will not, be tolerated, and it begs the question why Mr Carroll would bring such ill-thought out amendments to the Chamber in the first place, and whether he has considered the potential consequences of selfishly prolonging the progress of the Bill.

The Minister's focus and our focus here is on protecting people, not grandstanding. The real action and a genuine attempt to protect people in the private rented sector have been taken by this Minister. The Bill is necessary, and it provides those in the private rented sector with some protections during the crisis. The Bill will ensure that, in circumstances where someone in the private rented sector is struggling to pay rent through no fault of their own, they will have the certainty of a roof over their head and their landlord cannot move to evict them at this time. Introducing amendments that would make it harder for us to protect those people is, quite frankly, baffling, and for that reason, we will not support the amendments. We will support the Bill as proposed by the Minister.

Mr Durkan: I have approached today's debate like I approach every debate: with an open mind and a determination to secure what is best for people. I spoke at length last week on the aspects of the legislation that we in the SDLP might, in normal circumstances, use as a vehicle to deliver, with, primarily, a specific focus on students and the hardship that the current situation is causing them. I lamented that the legislation could not have been done sooner and that there was no provision to apply it retrospectively, but I also, following conversation with representatives of some of our most respected, responsible and reasonable groups working in the housing sector accepted the need for speed and their concerns that even well-intentioned, apparently helpful amendments may have unintended consequences and even jeopardise a Bill that,

although not perfect, is certainly a very welcome piece of legislation to protect people in the private rented sector.

While we as a party have therefore resisted tabling amendments, that is not to say that we would or will view unfavourably any amendments that are tabled. I certainly understand and appreciate the intention behind Mr Carroll's amendments to afford what, on the face of it, appear to be ensuring more protection for tenants and to do so for longer by extending the period of protection against the issuing of notices to quit from 12 weeks to one year. Last week, I emphasised the importance of flexibility so that there is a mechanism whereby the period can be extended if necessary and for as long as is necessary. The Minister was, at that stage, able to give the assurance that that will be the case.

It is imperative that we as an Assembly do everything that we can to keep a roof over people's heads and food on their table during this crisis and beyond. I invite the Minister to reaffirm that position and to outline what risk there would be in changing the period to a year and with the same flexibilities in place to reduce or end that period of protection when necessary. That will be crucial in determining how we vote this morning.

If we can already do what Mr Carroll's amendments are asking us to do, what is the point of those amendments? I know that Mr Carroll said that he will not now move amendment No 14. I am glad to hear that because that is one that we would certainly vote against, and, in my view, it is superfluous. The other amendments deal with the extension of the period. It is vital that people know that we are doing all that we can to protect them, and I do not think that this is the place for political point-scoring from any side. I do not think that anyone should be attacked or demeaned for bringing amendments to a piece of legislation.

Mr Butler: Like the honourable Member across the Benches from up in the north of Northern Ireland, we believe that Mr Carroll tabled the amendments not for political purposes but because he has a heart for putting a roof over people's heads. However, that is not to say that we will support the amendments.

The Bill was drafted by the Department, and, whilst not perfect, under the circumstances, we feel that it is proportionate. It is essential that, as a Government, we strike a balance and ensure that we provide the best possible support for all our citizens across the country.

11.15 am

It is also worth remembering that there are good and bad landlords, as the honourable Member said. Likewise, there are good and challenging tenants. However, across the board, the majority of landlords and tenants are good and enjoy good relationships. I am aware of landlords who are working to support their tenants where they can during the pandemic, and I am engaged in dialogue in more complex examples.

The Government have announced a number of support packages that should help to support those who have been affected by the pandemic. As has been highlighted, there is the job retention scheme, discretionary housing payments and other avenues of support that I encourage tenants to explore should they experience financial hardship.

The Department's Make the Call service is a useful resource that can assist with navigating the social security system and eligibility criteria. We call upon landlords to work with tenants, where they can, to support and assist each other during this difficult period. Where a tenant is struggling, it is absolutely essential that they engage with their landlord to try to find a workable solution. That is already happening, and it is imperative that dialogue continues.

We feel that the amendments go beyond proportionality. There is no doubt that we should do all that we can to protect and support private tenants. However, that cannot be achieved through the alteration of the notice to quit period alone, and financial support packages are crucial. Research indicates that the majority of private sector landlords are not large companies, but individual landlords with one or two properties. Therefore, as I previously mentioned, it is imperative that the Bill is proportionate. The burden cannot simply be passed over to the landlord alone, there is a collective responsibility. Amendment Nos 1, 8 and 12 would alter the notice to quit period from 12 weeks to one year, which we would not support.

Amendment Nos 2 and 7 deal with the date on which the Bill has an effect. The Bill, as drafted, would take effect the day after Royal Assent. With Mr Carroll's amendment, the Bill would take effect from 21 April 2020. However, as we understand from the Minister, that would be problematic. Therefore, further clarity from the Minister would be required.

Amendment No 3 would change the ending with date of the Bill from 30 September 2020 to one year after the Royal Assent date. However, subsection 3 of the Bill provides for the Department to amend by regulation, as required, the ending with date. That is sufficient, we believe, should it be required. Therefore, we do not support amendments Nos 4, 5 and 6 as they are mutually exclusive with amendment No 3.

Amendments No 9, 10 and 11 deal with the power to alter the notice period. Under the Bill, the Department can, by regulation, alter the notice to quit period from 12 weeks to six months, or any other specific periods that are less than six months. We feel that that is reasonable and proportionate and, therefore, we do not support the amendment.

Amendment No 13 deals with regulations under subsection 1. As drafted, they would be subject to negative resolution. However, we would be prepared to support the amendment and that would require a draft of any proposed regulation to be led before, and approved by, the resolution of the Assembly, allowing for democratic scrutiny and accountability.

Like Mr Durkan, we are glad to see that amendment No 14 was taken off.

Ms Armstrong: I join with others in commenting on the fact that when you table amendments, it is not done for political purposes, but with the best will. I believe that People Before Profit have tried to do that today.

I disagreed with Mr Carroll when he said that he does not want people to be evicted or to lose their homes. One way that people will lose their homes is if their landlord is bankrupted. One of the issues that we have seen with the coronavirus pandemic is the fact that, as people who are running businesses, landlords are also under pressure. While some of them have a mortgage holiday period, I would expect those landlords to pass that on to

their tenants. As it stands, I cannot accept most of the amendments. To ask a landlord to give someone a year's notice — perhaps that tenant has not paid their rent and will not pay that rent for a year — will effectively put that landlord out of business, meaning that other tenants could lose their home.

The landlord/tenant relationship is not dealt with in any of the amendments or in the Bill. What we are finding now are landlords who are putting pressure on tenants. That is not something for which we can legislate. The Bill contains a notice period that may be extended, and the period of the Bill can be extended to cover people during the emergency. Perhaps, after the terrible pandemic is over, the Committee could have a further discussion with the Minister in order to consider the improvements that we could make to private tenancies in the long term. For now, let us get over this piece.

I cannot support the extensions that Mr Carroll seeks. I do not think that they are reasonable or in keeping with the emergency situation that we are dealing with in the Bill. However, I can support amendment No 13. I believe in the openness, transparency and democracy of this place. I believe that there is time. The Minister knows that if someone were to be served 12 weeks' notice as soon as the Bill gets Royal Assent, the notice period would end in the last week of July or the first week of August. Therefore, there is time to bring amendments to the House to extend that period, if we remain in lockdown due to the pandemic at the end of June. I cannot support any of the other amendments. I do not think that they serve a purpose.

There is an issue with regard to students. Students have asked many of us about the issues that they have faced, which are less about being evicted and more about contract law. There must be a way in which we can work on contract law with DWP and the other devolved nations to consider students and the contracts that they undertake, so that, if there is a pandemic or crisis in the future, there will be a break clause to enable people to break their contracts earlier and not be faced with the financial penalties of trying to pay rent for places that they are not living in. That is a different matter.

I believe that amendment No 13 should be brought back to the Assembly and that we should have the right to consider it. If we are not going to complete a Committee Stage, the House should be allowed its democratic process.

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Carroll is being political. That is not an insult: he is a politician in a political chamber, among other politicians. Why would he not be political? If he is not being political, we are in the wrong room. We are in the wrong building. It is all politics. Let us not be naïve or shy away from the fact that people in this room conduct politics. I am proud of it, as, I am sure, all of you are. Let us do politics. Let us create politics. Let us make politics work.

The difficulty with Mr Carroll's amendments — everybody who has spoken so far has admitted it — is that many of them are unworkable and unnecessary. Other terms have been used. They are not proportionate or reasonable, other than, perhaps, amendment No 13, which is one that is floating around as an idea for some people. I will return to it in a moment.

I enter any debate on legislation by asking whether it is necessary; whether it carries out the function for which it is required; and, of course, whether it can be improved. The

legislation that is before us is necessary and carries out the function that is required. In his opening remarks, Mr Carroll referred to reports of health workers being evicted within 24 hours by unscrupulous landlords. I, too, have heard those reports. I do not think that that has happened in the North. I think that those reports refer to Britain. Let us be very clear: as I said in my previous contribution to the debate on the Bill a few weeks ago, it is against the law as it currently stands to evict a tenant with 24 hours' notice, a week's notice, three weeks' notice, or whatever it may be. No landlord can put a tenant out on the street without following proper court procedures. Mr Carroll's amendments will not resolve that issue. If an unscrupulous landlord pressurises and puts a tenant out on the street, it does not matter if there is a 12-week notice period or one-year notice period: that landlord is unscrupulous and is acting outside the law.

As advocates for citizens, we must ensure that they know their rights and send out a very clear message from the Chamber that no landlord can evict a tenant without following proper court procedures. The Bill's current provisions will offer tenants further protections. However, like any law or piece of legislation, it is useless unless it is enacted and enforced. Let each and every one of us ensure that the law will be enforced in the future.

The issue of students, understandably, arises during this debate because students have found themselves in very difficult positions, as have many landlords who are renting to students. The Minister told us in the last debate that she does not have the authority, or delegated authority, to deal with the students' issue. It is civil law; it comes from Westminster. So why raise the expectations of students, many of whom have emailed us, that somehow Mr Carroll's amendments are going to resolve that issue, because they are not. As well as being advocates for our constituents, let us be honest with them. The Minister cannot deal with that issue because she does not have the legal authority, neither does the Assembly and neither does Mr Carroll. If, by some miracle, his amendments passed, it would not become law because it would be ruled as being out of order. So let us be honest with our constituents on that matter.

With regard to amendment No 13, I fully adhere to the scrutiny of legislation, Ministers and the Executive. There is no question that there should be anything other than detailed scrutiny, but this legislation can be scrutinised by the Committee. The Committee has to deal with these matters, and during these difficult and very worrying times, there is a role and we will do things in a different way. This legislation is being done in a very different way, but the Committee's role is paramount and scrutiny of the Minister will be maintained. There is an issue of what will happen during the summer recess if there is a requirement to do something and the Assembly is not sitting — the Assembly may be sitting during the summer; we do not know. What happens during that period if the Minister cannot act in the way that is needed; we are left in limbo. There is a solution to amendment No 13. Members talked about it not being proportionate or reasonable; amendment No 13 is not necessary. It is not necessary because there is Assembly scrutiny of the Minister and her powers.

The most damning line from Mr Carroll is that he said that even if all of his amendments passed, the legislation would not be good enough. It begs the question: why did he not bring forward amendments that would have made

the legislation good enough? He had an opportunity to do so. He has tabled 14 amendments and is moving 13. So, it comes back to my original point: Mr Carroll is being political, which is his right. The question that he has failed to answer is whether he is being legislatively competent. I do not think that he has passed that test.

We will be voting against the amendments, as tabled, because we believe that, in the circumstances, the Minister's legislation offers the protections required to those that it can offer protection to.

Miss Woods: I support the Bill. I will set out some views on the amendments, while supporting amendment No 13. I wish to thank the Minister for introducing the Bill, and for the countless other measures that she and her Department have announced recently. They have been extremely active and willing to move on many issues, and it must be noted that the Bill is another measure that has been introduced to try to protect people in light of the pandemic.

Northern Ireland is highly dependent on the private rented sector to meet housing need in the absence of a robust social housing new-build strategy. This is a wider issue but it must be recognised that the potential loss of a section of the private rented sector leaves the market open for large-scale investment by absentee landlords more interested in profit than people. We do not wish for this to happen and the best of a bad situation must be reached.

A number of people are not protected by the legislation. That must be noted from the outset, as Members have done today and last week. For students, including those who are on fixed-term tenancies and those people who are guarantors for students, not being released from the tenancies early, negotiations with landlords are recommended and anything that is agreed needs to be in writing. Unpaid rent can constitute a break in the agreement and non-payment could open up legal proceedings. I hope that the Minister can engage with the Minister for the Economy and others to try to address issues for student tenants who are facing this, and I welcome the financial support payments that the Department has put in place so far.

11.30 am

The Bill does not change the process for eviction, nor can it be described as a ban on evictions. It is important to reiterate that and to make it clear to as many people as possible. It simply changes the length of a notice to quit to 12 weeks, with two circumstances that mean that the notice cannot last longer than 12 weeks. It does not prevent tenants from being evicted through the emergency period. However, it is unlikely that any evictions will take place until the guidance to the court changes, due to the current guidance from the Lord Chief Justice, which is welcome. However, it does not protect tenants from eviction. The Bill does not protect those who commit serious antisocial behaviour during this period, but, without being too prescriptive, who decides what serious antisocial behaviour is? Nor does it mention licensees and the risk that they will face homelessness. I wish the Minister to address that later.

The Bill does not apply retrospectively, and that is something that Mr Carroll's amendments, on my reading of them, try to address. I wonder, however, while this does

not take away from the stress of an awful situation that people may find themselves in, whether we know how many people could be affected if the date was changed to the 21 April. Legally, can that be done? That is crucial to this. We do not want to see tenants, landlords or, indeed, the Department being dragged through a legal battle. I hope that the Minister, landlords and tenants will take that on board.

The amendments would provide much-needed long-term security and peace of mind for those experiencing financial difficulties. In submitting them, Mr Carroll makes his good intentions clear. However, they raise a number of issues. Extending the notice period to one year means, in effect, that a tenant could accrue significant arrears by not paying rent for months and months and a landlord would not be able to seek a court order for eviction until the year was up. Given that many private landlords in Northern Ireland own only one property or a small number of properties and pay mortgages through rental income, the potential loss of income could mean a serious level of repossession and landlords losing their property. As I said earlier, since the private rented sector is crucial to housing in Northern Ireland, that is problematic.

Legally, interfering with a landlord's right to evict could raise the prospect of a judicial review on the basis that the state cannot determine how an individual's property is to be used. As the amendments could allow a private tenant to live in a property without paying rent for a considerable period, could the amendments be subject to legal challenge? The original intention of extending notice periods as soon as possible would therefore become difficult to enact. We need further clarity on that. Given the impracticalities of the proposed extensions to the notice period and the emergency period, it would be difficult to support the amendments in their current form.

Assembly oversight is worth discussing further; it is an interesting point to raise. Amendment No 13 would change the procedure through which the Department can amend the notice and emergency periods. Instead of that being done through regulations, the proposal is that changes to the notice or emergency periods:

“may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly”.

We would welcome that. By opening up the possibility of greater scrutiny by the whole House, amendment No 13 appears to provide Assembly oversight of when and how the notice period can be changed through regulations. That is definitely something that we will support. The more chances we are given to perform a scrutiny role, the better.

I have questions on the practicalities of the Bill in general that I would like to raise. First, on communication, how will the contents and provisions of the Bill be explained to landlords and tenants, and how will they be disseminated? Clear, concise direction needs to be issued on what the legislation means and what it does not mean. There are a number of key statements, and guidance needs to be issued on the Bill, especially that it is not a payment break for those renting. Moreover, how can landlords be protected from losing their properties at the end of the exemption period? What more could lenders do? Secondly, what happens if tenants decide not to pay rent and do not enter into negotiations with the landlord? Landlords

may be very worried about that, as it will be used as an excuse by some to stop paying rent. Issues such as debt and arrears could have unintended consequences. How will the Department define the exemptions and the level of proof, should they agree to extend the period? I urge anyone in such a situation to utilise the service available for mediation and housing advice, notably the ongoing work of Housing Rights.

We wish that the Bill would go further into many other avenues in order to address the fundamental need to protect those renting long term, but we understand the legal and practical difficulties of implementing them. Therefore, we urge the Minister and her Department to keep the issue under constant review and to bring forward such measures if required. The Bill cannot be seen as a simple solution to a complex problem, but we must ensure that relevant changes are made as soon as possible. We will therefore support the Bill in order to ensure the best mitigation that can be made through an expedited process now, alongside amendment No 13.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I thank Members for their contributions and the proposer for the amendments. I will also group the amendments according to their four effects, but I know that one has been taken out.

In general, I ask Members to reject the amendments, although I am sure that the Member who tabled them did so in a good spirit. They would have either no effect or would risk reducing the protections for tenants. That is the key thrust for me. This is not your normal private tenancies Bill. Obviously, I would bring a more comprehensive Bill; that is the first thing to say. I would want it to have the full scrutiny of the House and the Committee. However, as has been said over the past few weeks when I have been here bringing through emergency legislation or regulation changes, we are not in normal times. We are in a crisis; we are in a public health emergency; we are in a global pandemic. As Minister for Communities, I am trying to respond to that global health emergency as quickly as possible. At times, that means that I cannot bring things through by the proper processes, but that does not mean that we cannot have oversight. Obviously, that is important. It must be at the forefront of our minds that we ensure that we do not delay the protections being brought in. That is the big concern for me. Any undue delay will mean that people are not protected and we extend that situation for another few weeks. That would be unacceptable for anyone, as you will know from engaging with people who are being impacted. It is also important, as agreed last week, that the legislation moves as quickly as possible. Any changes will mean a delay in the legislation, and that will mean a delay in the protections. I understand 100% that people want oversight and accountability. In the normal run of things, that is what would happen, and I would have no problem with that. I do weekly tie-ins with the Chair of the Committee. I know that the Committee is keen to scrutinise, but any delay will mean that tenants will be unprotected for a period. That is the concern for me.

There is a proposal to change the 12-week period for notice to quit to one year. Believe me, I have tried to push that as much as I can to give as much protection as I can, but that amendment would distort the balance that the Bill strikes between rights. That is the fundamental issue. It would mean that the Bill was outside legislative competence, and it would likely be challenged; we know

that. I am informed that that challenge would likely be successful. Therefore, while there may have been good intent behind that amendment, it would mean that, if the Bill were passed, it would do nothing and protect no one. It would fall to that legal challenge, and, therefore, there would be no protections for tenants.

The extension to 12 weeks is proportionate. It is a proportionate response to the current crisis. This is not normal private tenancy legislation, and the amendments were tabled in response to the public health emergency that we face. The other issues will be debated in the proper manner of primary legislation, but we are not in that space. We are responding to a public health emergency, an emergency such as we have never seen in our lifetime. The 12-week period is tied to the shielding period and the public health advice that people need to shield for 12 weeks if they receive a letter. As of last week, people were still receiving those shielding letters from their GP. That measure is to protect the most vulnerable and enable buy-to-let landlords to have the three-month mortgage holiday. Therefore I consider the interference with landlords' property rights lawful, justified and proportionate. An appropriate balance has been struck to address the public health emergency in this period.

The amendment to request the Bill to take effect from 21 April would give a retrospective aspect to the legislation. That was considered during the policy-making process, and I touched on that last week. As I set out last week, taking account of legal advice received, I do not believe that it is possible to do so without making the legislation vulnerable to legal challenge. I would love to retrospectively have the legislation put back, but my reason for not moving on this is that you would get into legal challenge and debate. Again, that would delay the legislation. The point of the legislation is to bring protections in now, not to bring them in in two weeks. Any legal wrangling, argument or disagreement will delay the Bill's implementation. Therefore, you are actually working against what, you say, you are trying to do. That is the concern around trying to get into the debate around retrospective planning.

On the regulations extending the relevant period beyond 12 weeks — to look at draft affirmative procedure — that amendment would make things more complex if I needed to extend the notice-to-quit period. In all cases, the regulations are scrutinised by the Committee, but the main reason to reject the amendment is a practical one. A scenario in which the Assembly was not sitting, whether that was as a result of the coronavirus — we do not know how this will unfold over the coming weeks and months — or, possibly, because of the summer recess, is the reason that we have gone through accelerated passage and tried to hear the Bill over two days rather than over an extended period. We are trying to move it as quickly as possible to offer those protections. If medical advice comes out after the 12-week period saying that there is a second spike, there may be a new wave and we still need people to shield, I need to respond to that as quickly as possible. In my current legislation, that means that you do not have the full and proper scrutiny, but surely people can understand my reasons and intent for asking for that to be done. I do not want to be in a scenario where I cannot table the regulations because there is a summer recess and the Assembly is not sitting.

I give a commitment that the regulations will have the proper scrutiny of the Committee. I give a commitment that I will engage early in that scrutiny to allow the members of the Committee to take the time to look at that if there is a need to do that. Again, this is all predicated on public health advice and medical advice. That will be assessed as we move through this in the coming weeks. I ask for that amendment to be rejected for those reasons to allow me to take that forward.

I know that the last amendment was withdrawn, but my Department issued guidance to tenants and landlords a few weeks ago. That guidance will be taken into account by the court service. We have had engagement with the court service and the Lord Chief Justice. I am bringing the protections in to try to protect the most vulnerable at this time as a response to the coronavirus. This is not trying to change the whole Private Tenancies Bill; that will be at another stage, and we will have the proper consideration. This is about bringing in protections here and now so that no one will be left homeless during this public health pandemic. Any delay on this of a week or two could push it back. It would have to be redrafted and go to the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) and the Attorney General. It would have to go back to the Executive and to the Committee and then a result brought back to the Chamber. That is the concern for me. That is the only overriding fact for me. I want to get the protections in as soon as possible, so I ask Members to reject the amendments.

The last thing that I want to add relates to housing benefit, because it was raised. Obviously, there is a housing cost element to housing benefit and universal credit. People are entitled to the local housing allowance. That was set at the bottom end of private rents. In the past few years, that rate has been frozen. The local housing allowance freeze was lifted, and it has been increased for everyone. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, people who have become unemployed can now apply for discretionary housing payments to have their full rent covered for the 13 weeks. That protection extends to housing benefit for universal credit claimants.

11.45 am

Mr Carroll: I will do my best to sum up and reply as much as I can, but there is obviously a lot in that. Thanks for Members' comments and contributions.

Paula Bradley raised concerns, generally speaking, about the need to have more scrutiny. She said that legislation had to be proportional. Generally speaking, I respond to that by saying that there is not enough legislation in place across the board that supports renters. If we are to be proportional, we need a lot more legislation in place to support renters. She said that she would not support any of the amendments, if I am correct in summing her position up. Sinéad Ennis from Sinn Féin said that the amendments were an attempt to cynically delay the Bill. I put it to her that the real question is why she and her party do not support amendments that strengthen the rights of tenants. Mr Durkan made a number of comments and he obviously defended the right to propose amendments. Perish the thought of Members trying to make amendments in a political Chamber. He defended the right to do so, and I thank him for that. Mr Butler raised concerns about all the amendments but indicated that he supported amendment

No 13. He made some other points, obviously, as well. Kellie Armstrong, similarly, said that she could not accept most of the amendments. She raised concerns about the financial situation of some landlords and said that she could not support the amendments apart from amendment No 13. She also suggested the necessity for or, certainly, the consideration of a breakaway clause for renters at some point in the future. Mr O'Dowd said quite a lot: "unworkable", "not proportionate" and "not legislatively competent". I suggest that he speaks to the Bill Office, who said that the amendments were legislatively competent, workable and proportionate.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: No, I will not.

I am disappointed that the response from some in the Chamber to my amendments, which sought to strengthen the Bill in the interests of renters, was to attack. I thank those in the Chamber who took seriously the intention of the amendments. To be clear, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, the amendments were drawn up in conjunction with renters and housing activists. They are, in my view and theirs, necessary to protect people during the crisis. It is very telling that it was met with defensiveness, deflection and attack in some quarters. Obviously, Mr O'Dowd mentioned politics and the right to be political, but there is a difference between politics and sheer political point scoring.

Rachel Woods mentioned concerns about renters, students and the need for security for tenants. She said that she would support amendment No 13, which, in my view, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, is essential. Generally speaking, it seems to be accepted that we have learned the lessons of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) for democracy, scrutiny and accountability. If that is the case, I implore and encourage Members to support amendment No 13, if for no other reason than that.

I am concerned there was reference to and quite a number of comments about a summer break. I take the point, but surely we should not consider a summer break before having legislation that is strong enough and doing whatever we need to do to make sure that it is in place to protect renters and people generally in this situation.

Generally speaking, we obviously are in an emergency situation, and emergency measures are needed. If they are subject to legal challenge by landlords, there is an onus on the House and on Ministers to challenge landlords in the courts, if necessary, and to stand up for and support tenants and people who are in rental accommodation.

In closing, the Minister mentioned a number of points about a balance of rights. I challenge that again. We need to stand up for renters at this time, and not enough is being done on that. We have seen measures in place for landlords and nowhere near enough measures in place for renters. We should not be afraid of challenging landlords even if that means in the courts.

The Minister also mentioned the 12-week period in line with the guidance in the shielding letters and the announcements made by the NHS. Obviously, as she will be aware, most medical officials and most organisations, such as the World Health Organization, have stated that the crisis is likely to go beyond 12 weeks.

A vaccine, as I said earlier, will not be available for the next year or so.

I commend the amendments to the House. I will leave my comments there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much. I hope that the House will be kind with me. Since taking up this office, I have not been through a list of 14 amendments for vote. It has probably been three years since the House considered a substantive piece of legislation. If we are all nice to each other, we might get through to the other side of it.

Clause 1 (Notice to quit: private tenancies)

Amendment No 1 negatived.

Amendment No 2 negatived.

Amendment No 3 negatived.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will not call amendment Nos 4,5 or 6, as they are consequential to amendment No 3, which was not made.

Amendment No 7 negatived.

Clause 2 (Power to alter notice period)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will not call amendment No 8, as it is consequential to amendment No 1, which has not been made.

Amendment No 9 negatived.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will not call amendment Nos 10 or 11, as they are consequential to amendment No 9, which has not been made. I will not call amendment No 12, as it is consequential to amendment No 1, which has not been made. Amendment No 13 proposed:

In clause 2, page 2, line 22, leave out "are subject to negative resolution" and insert

"may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly".— *[Mr Carroll.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that, if possible, given the current climate, it would be preferable to avoid a Division of the House. However, before the Assembly divides, I want to remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and must not enter the Lobbies.

It is important that, during any Division, social distancing in the Chamber continues to be observed. In order to facilitate that, I ask Members to do the following: any Members in the Chamber who are not due to vote in person should consider leaving the Chamber until the Division has concluded. Those Members who wish to vote in the Lobbies on the opposite side of the Chamber to which they are sitting should leave the Chamber via the nearest door and enter the relevant Lobby via the Rotunda. Those remaining Members who are sitting closest to the Lobby doors should enter the Lobbies first, and any Member who has voted may then wish to leave the Chamber until the Division has concluded.

I remind Members of the need to be patient at all times, to follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks and to respect the need for social distancing.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 30; Noes 53.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr Muir, Mr Nesbitt, Mr O'Toole, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Mr Carroll.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Mrs Dodds, Ms Dolan, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Ms Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buckley and Ms Ennis.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley [Teller, Noes], Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler [Teller, Ayes] voted for Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Durkan voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Dallat, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis [Teller, Noes], Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to give us a few moments while we change the top Table.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 14 not moved.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 4 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill: Second Stage

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill [NIA Bill 03/17-22] be agreed.

Since becoming Justice Minister, I have made progressing domestic abuse legislation a key priority for my Department. The urgency of addressing the issue has become even more apparent during the current COVID-19 crisis. As we advise people to stay home, stay safe, save lives, we are also mindful that, for many in our community, home is not a safe place or a haven from harm. Instead, it is the very place where they are most vulnerable to abuse and to their abuser. Combined with physical distancing, which so often ends in social isolation, those already at risk have found themselves frequently without their most basic support networks or the temporary respite from abuse that being able to leave their home, even for a short time, might bring, compounding their vulnerability and the risk of harm. To that end, across the Executive, we are working with statutory and voluntary sector partners to consider how best we can support those most affected, not only during this crisis but beyond it.

Whilst the current crisis has raised awareness of the plight of those who are victims of domestic abuse, it is imperative that our response is not temporary or fleeting, because domestic abuse is neither. The legislation is part of a strategic, long-term approach to tackle domestic abuse and violence in our community, and to protect victims. I, therefore, want to thank the Justice Committee for its cooperation in taking forward Second Reading and the Committee Stage, even though we are working in a most unusual environment. I hope that how importantly the Executive and Assembly view this issue will offer some reassurance to those suffering at the hands of an abuser. It also gives me the opportunity today to encourage people who are suffering abuse, who are vulnerable and who need help at this time to reach out, to call or email the helplines, to reach out to a friend or neighbour, or to call the police. Help is available. While you may be social distancing, you are definitely not alone.

It is right that, as I introduce the Bill, I focus first on the victims of domestic abuse: people of every class and creed, of every age, race, gender, gender identity or sexual orientation, from every workplace and community, our neighbours, our friends and even our families. They are people from right across Northern Ireland who wake every morning feeling anxious, isolated, controlled, trapped, degraded, humiliated or ashamed, always on their guard waiting for the next attack, whether that be physical or psychological, fearful in their home and, sometimes, fearful for their life. Their abuser may be a partner or former partner, a close family member, the person who sits across from them at the dinner table, a person with whom they have shared their life, their home and their vulnerability, someone they should be able to trust, but, tragically, cannot.

Since I took up post in January, a number of survivors of domestic abuse have bravely shared their experience with me and urged me to act to ensure that psychologically, financially and emotionally harmful behaviour is criminalised. I want to thank each of those who have done so, because they highlighted to me more effectively than

any statistic what a diverse group of people is affected by domestic abuse.

Those of us of a certain vintage will have been conditioned by the stereotypical imagery surrounding domestic abuse: a female victim and a physically bigger, stronger and violent male perpetrator. While abuse against female victims still makes up the majority of domestic abuse reported, it is important that we recognise that anyone can be a victim and that the abuse itself can take many forms, including psychological, which may be a precursor to violence or an end in itself. Domestic abuse can be inflicted on anyone and by anyone, regardless of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, education, race, colour, age, nationality or disability. At present, almost a third of crimes involving domestic abuse are perpetrated against men. We know that it does not have to leave a physical mark or scar for it to be abuse and cause harm to the victim.

In 2016, the then Justice Minister, David Ford, launched a public consultation that sought views on whether a specific offence should be created to capture patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour in intimate relationships. Respondents felt that creating a specific offence would send a clear message that domestic abuse, in all its forms, was a crime and would not be tolerated in our society. Consultees stated that any new offence should reflect the unique and specific nature of domestic abuse and recognise its repetitive nature. It is that repetitiveness that is key.

Respondents were also of the view that an offence would provide the police with the opportunity to intervene early and perhaps stop the escalation of domestic abuse. I echo that view. The police are currently attending incidents where coercive and controlling behaviour is present, but they are limited in what they can do as that behaviour on its own is not currently an offence. Consultation also highlighted that the offence should cover former partners, given that abuse and coercive control often continues and even escalates after separation. Sadly, experience has shown us that the risk of domestic homicide also increases at that point.

12.30 pm

The views of consultees regarding the seriousness and impact of psychological abuse were clear. I want to share with you just a few of the quotes from those who responded to the consultation, which I think drive that point home. One respondent said:

"Slap me, punch me, kick me, but do not put me through one more hour of mental torture".

Another said:

"If I had a choice between being physically or mentally tortured, I would choose the beating".

Yet another said:

"If coercive control was a law, I would have gone to the police much earlier".

These quotes speak for themselves in demonstrating exactly why a new domestic abuse offence is needed. The Bill, if passed by the House, would create an offence that recognises the experience of these victims and survivors and many more like them across Northern Ireland. It would

capture the repetitive nature of abusive behaviour and its cumulative effect. While the Bill is not a panacea, it is not just a positive step in the right direction but perhaps a leap forward in the fight against domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.

Before turning to the detail of the Bill, it may be helpful to briefly set out for Members what the Bill does not do and the rationale for the choices that have been made at this time. The Bill does not provide for a definition of domestic abuse, a domestic abuse commissioner, domestic abuse protection notices (DAPNs) or domestic abuse protection orders (DAPOs). I consider a definition in the legislation unnecessary in a local context, something that has already been discussed with our statutory and voluntary sector partners. The Bill sets out in quite some detail what abusive behaviour is. There would be nothing further to be gained, either legislatively or operationally, from a separate definition.

I remain to be convinced of the need for a domestic abuse commissioner. Given the very close and constructive working relationships with our key statutory and voluntary sector partners and the fact that a single police service covers the entire jurisdiction, it is unclear to me what additionality a commissioner would bring. Further, and while not a reason in and of itself, commissioners generally cost in the region of £1 million, money that would, in my view, be better invested in other services such as our new advocacy support service or behavioural change programmes to address abusive behaviour. However, I am listening carefully to representations in that regard.

By contrast, I see considerable merit in introducing domestic abuse protection notices and orders, but I intend to do so through a future legislative vehicle. Their introduction requires significant work that would benefit from being informed by the practical experience of colleagues in England and Wales in their operation and utility. The opportunity to introduce DAPNs and DAPOs exists in the miscellaneous provisions Bill. I intend to take the miscellaneous provisions Bill forward next year, thus avoiding any delay in the enactment of this Bill, which we are all keen to see in place as soon as possible.

Turning to the detail of the Bill, those of you who have read it — I am sure that you have all read it — will know that it has 28 clauses and is divided into three parts. Part 1 includes the creation of a new domestic abuse offence, child aggravators associated with that offence, a general aggravation of domestic abuse associated with any other offence, and a number of associated changes to criminal procedures, evidence and sentencing in domestic abuse-related cases. Both the child and general aggravator would enable sentencing to be increased up to the maximum that would otherwise be available. As mentioned, the new offence will make it illegal for an individual to engage in a course of abusive behaviour — that is on at least two occasions — against an intimate partner, former partner or close family member. This could be a parent, grandparent, son, daughter, grandchild, partner, former partner, someone who you are in an intimate personal relationship with, a close family member or sibling. The offence will be subject to two conditions, first, that a reasonable person would consider that the course of behaviour would be likely to cause the person to suffer harm and, secondly, that the accused either intended to cause harm or was reckless as to the likelihood of doing so. As a result, the offence can be committed even if harm is not inflicted, reflecting the

resilience of the victim or that, for many, abusive behaviour has effectively become normalised. It will be sufficient that a reasonable person would consider the behaviour likely to result in harm.

I am also clear that the devastating impact of familial domestic abuse on victims should not be underestimated and should be captured by this new offence. For example, an adult child abusing their parent would be captured as would a member of the LGBTQ community being subject to abuse in the familial home. However, I am not seeking to criminalise normal parental behaviour, such as a removal of a child's privileges as part of their discipline. Furthermore, I do not wish to legislate where legislation is already in place, as is the case with child protection. For those reasons, the offence or an aggravated offence would not apply in the context of someone having parental responsibility for a young person. It is worth noting, however, that the provisions may apply where two teenagers are involved in an abusive relationship.

The overarching purpose of the new offence is to capture and criminalise patterns of non-physical behaviour — that is coercive or controlling behaviour that amounts to psychological, emotional or financial abuse. The Bill clearly sets out what amounts to abusive behaviour. Abusive behaviour by an offender includes behaviour that is physically or sexually violent, threatening or has a range of impacts on an individual. This includes making the victim feel subordinate, isolated, controlled or where their freedom of movement or action is restricted. Importantly, the description of abusive behaviour is not exhaustive and includes both direct behaviour towards the victim as well as their child or another person.

The effects of the abusive behaviour set out in the Bill are deliberately broad, recognising that each person's experience will be different. The type of behaviour may appear routine, but its aggregate effect causes the build-up of constant anxiety and fear. As the advertising campaign run by the police says, the victim is made to feel like they are walking on eggshells. The behaviour may be such that the abuser makes them feel frightened, humiliated or degraded or is behaviour that isolates them from family or friends, or involves the monitoring of their phone, their email or their social media use. The abuser might also use mind games to make the victim question their own sanity, gaslighting the victim to question whether the abuse is actually real.

In some cases, behaviour will be tailored to cause the victim as much upset as possible, but it may not be immediately obvious to others outside that relationship or even other family members. For example, a perpetrator humming a particular tune might seem trivial or even go unnoticed by other family members, friends or front-line services and the police, but it could have a specific meaning for the victim that causes them fear when considered alongside a series of other ongoing and persistent behaviours. Indeed, some perpetrators may use the fact that the behaviour appears trivial to make that victim question their own sanity and judgement. The offence created by this Bill is purposely broad to capture those types of nuanced behaviours.

As I have already mentioned, there needs to be a pattern of behaviour, and a reasonable person would need to consider that the course of behaviour would be likely to cause harm to the person who suffers it. There would also

be a defence, where a person can show that their course of action was reasonable. Evidence of this would need to be shown.

We also know that witnessing domestic abuse is devastating for children and can have a long-lasting impact on their well-being. For this reason, the Bill includes two child aggravators, where the offence is aggravated by virtue of the involvement of a young person. This will apply to the domestic abuse offence where the victim is under 18. It would also apply where a child sees, hears or is present during an incident of abuse, where they are used to abuse another person or where abusive behaviour is directed at them, enabling the sentencing to be increased up to the maximum available. I consider these provisions essential in recognising the damaging effect that domestic abuse can have on children. I also want to see domestic abuse recognised in other offences, in terms of the potential for increased sentencing where that is considered appropriate by the judiciary. For example, if someone damages their partner's car or property to cause them harm and fear, the offence of criminal damage could potentially have an increased sentence associated with it. The Bill gives effect to that through the inclusion of a statutory general aggravator.

Shamefully, some abusers also seek to use the criminal justice system itself to further victimise their partner, ex-partner or family member. For that reason, the Bill includes safeguards to prevent an abuser using the criminal justice process to further exert control and influence over a victim.

These provisions should help to minimise the trauma for the victim, while ensuring that the proper administration of justice is achieved. For example, the accused will be prevented from electing for trial by jury at the Crown Court in summary proceedings in relation to the domestic abuse offence. That builds on our existing provisions.

Those subject to a domestic abuse offence, or an aggravated offence, will automatically be eligible for consideration of special measures when giving evidence, which could include the use of live links or screens.

The provisions will also prohibit the cross-examination of an individual in a criminal court by the accused, where that relates to the domestic abuse offence, or an offence aggravated by domestic abuse. That provision currently applies to sexual and trafficking offences.

Together, I believe that the provisions will help victims to give the best evidence that they can in court, and also reduce the number of victims disengaging from the criminal justice system.

Members may also be aware that the Istanbul Convention requires that the domestic abuse offence be created locally, and for extra-territorial jurisdiction to be extended to that. It would apply if the accused is habitually resident in Northern Ireland or is a UK national. The offence would, for example, cover incidents that take place when a couple or family members go on holiday outside the UK, therefore ensuring that the totality of the abusive behaviour can be brought before the courts. It would be for the police and the Public Prosecution Service to consider the evidence necessary for such a case to be brought forward.

It is also essential that we set a penalty that corresponds with the seriousness of the offence. Given the range of behaviours that domestic abuse often involves, and the

serious and long-lasting harm it can have, the maximum penalty in the Magistrates' Courts will be 12 months' imprisonment, and 14 years in the Crown Court. It may also include a fine.

Naturally, the maximum sentence will be reserved for the most serious cases. It could relate to an offence that is entirely one of psychological abuse, which may have occurred over a significant time period. However, it is more likely to relate to coercive behaviour that includes both psychological and physical abuse.

Moving on, Part 2 of the Bill will make new statutory provision to protect victims of domestic abuse from being cross-examined by perpetrators, in person, in family proceedings. Just as perpetrators may seek to use the criminal justice system to further abuse and control their victim, the family justice system can be similarly exploited. Indeed, the family courts may be the first time that many victims have engaged with the justice system. In contrast with criminal proceedings, where there is already specific statutory provision to protect victims of sexual and other offences from being cross-examined by an unrepresented defendant in person, there is no corresponding provision for family proceedings.

The Gillen review of family justice highlighted that difference and recommended the introduction of legislation to make the same protection available to victims giving evidence in family proceedings. Therefore, last summer the Department consulted on options for legislation, and consultees strongly supported the introduction of legislation.

The Bill provides for an automatic prohibition of cross-examination in person in certain circumstances and, in cases where that automatic prohibition does not apply, the court would have a discretionary power to prohibit cross-examination in person. The court will also have the power to appoint a legal representative, paid for by the Department, to carry out cross-examination on behalf of a person prohibited from doing so in person. These provisions will ensure that victims are supported to give their best evidence in the family courts, and that the courts continue to operate fairly to both parties.

12.45 pm

Finally, Part 3 makes provision for the commencement of the Bill and gives my Department powers to make such transitional, transitory or savings provisions as it considers appropriate when bringing these provisions into operation. It also provides the Bill's short title.

Like many of you, I am impatient for change and want to see the timely passage of the Bill through the Assembly. I am, therefore, asking each of you for your support in keeping the Bill focused on its provisions, which are to deal with this new domestic abuse offence. I believe that any material policy amendments that you may wish to make can be better addressed through a future legislative vehicle. That is important to ensure that the offence can be brought forward without any further delay at this point, and I ask for the assistance of Members of this place, particularly members of the Justice Committee.

Much hard work has gone into bringing us to this point, so, in closing, I pay tribute to everyone who has helped us to reach this stage. There has been extensive engagement with our statutory and voluntary sector partners, with

a multi-agency task and finish group established to consider the draft legislation. Importantly, as part of our deliberations, we also considered offences in other jurisdictions relating to controlling and coercive behaviour, including what is often perceived as the Scottish gold standard. Our offence locally is not only similar but goes further in that it includes abusive behaviour in an intimate partner relationship and familial abuse, reflecting our Government's strategy position.

Discussions with our partners have been ongoing on the Bill and on a wide range of other policy areas. That has involved a range of voluntary sector partners, including the Women's Aid Federation, the Men's Advisory Project, Action on Elder Abuse, NSPCC, Nexus and the Rainbow Project, as well as representatives from the police, the Probation Board and the Public Prosecution Service. The Bill could not have been delivered without their input and assistance.

This is a significant piece of legislation that will help thousands of people across Northern Ireland who are experiencing domestic abuse. Abusers can wield power over their victims because it is not currently an offence to do so. Now is our chance to rectify that situation by criminalising psychological and emotionally harmful behaviour and sending out a clear message to perpetrators that their behaviour will not be tolerated and will be punished. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. The Second Stage of the Bill has been moved. In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated a time limit for the debate. I call the Chair of the Justice Committee, Mr Paul Givan.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Before I speak about the Bill, this is the first opportunity that I have had in the House to pay my respects to my colleague and good friend Edwin Poots. We share a constituency, I have known the family for many years and I knew Charlie throughout that time. A lot of glowing tributes have been paid to him. I had one experience with him when out canvassing in a rural area. Charlie was in the car while I was at a door trying to engage with somebody. The horn — you would know about this if you knew Charlie — started blasting, and he shouted, "If you haven't got his vote by now, you're never going to get it. Move on!" *[Laughter.]* I had had literally only 60 seconds with the constituent. As I got back to the vehicle, I opened the door. I had one leg in, and off he went, so I was hanging out of the door while moving onto the next house. Patience was not necessarily one of Charlie's best qualities, but he was a big character and one who I owe a great deal to, particularly in Lagan Valley, as he was somebody who paved the way for the next generation of Democratic Unionists in that constituency. I just want to put on record my appreciation to him and my best wishes to Edwin, Angela, Joy and the wider family circle. Charlie's legacy lives on in his son, and it lives on in his grandchildren, who are actively engaged in politics and missionary work across the world, which was something that Charlie held dear.

Moving on, I will speak on behalf of the Committee for Justice on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. The Committee welcomes the Bill. It has been a long time coming, which the Minister acknowledged. Upon the restoration of the Assembly in January, one of the

first things that I did, with the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Linda Dillon, was to encourage the Minister to bring this legislation through the Assembly. That was rather than continuing to use the domestic abuse Bill, which is going through Westminster, as the most appropriate legislative vehicle.

I note that Westminster is dealing with this issue today. I think that it is worth marking that both Parliaments are handling this issue at this time. While it may take slightly longer to have the legislation in place, that is far outweighed by the advantage of being able to scrutinise the provisions in depth and to make sure that the statutory and voluntary organisations and, most importantly, those who have suffered domestic abuse have a voice in shaping the legislation and in ensuring that it meets the specific needs in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I thank the Minister for giving the Assembly and the Committee for Justice the opportunity to do what we are primarily here to do: to pass legislation that meets the requirements of Northern Ireland and is as good as we can make it.

Home is where most people feel secure; it is a haven where you can relax with your loved ones. If you cannot feel safe in your home, where can you feel safe? Yet for many people — women, men, young and old — home becomes the worst place to be. It is a prison, a living nightmare, and the crime is committed by someone that supposedly loves them and that they should be able to trust. Police Service statistics show that, in the 12 months from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019, there were 31,705 domestic abuse incidents recorded in Northern Ireland, including 18,033 domestic abuse crimes. That is the highest of any 12-month period recorded since 2004-05. The number of crimes increased by 14.8% on the previous 12 months. Domestic abuse crimes made up 16.9% of all police recorded crime. Those figures only reflect the incidents reported. What about all the incidences of domestic violence and abuse that are never reported?

I know that I have quoted big numbers and sometimes you lose the scale of the problem in statistics. Behind every single one of those figures are lives being destroyed, families being torn apart and the knock-on impact for the children who witness that abuse. That is a huge issue that needs to be dealt with and dealt with in the legislation. It can happen to anybody — young, old, men, women, heterosexual, LGBTQ, middle class, working class, in urban settings and in rural settings — and while still predominantly a crime suffered by women, the most recent figures show that almost one-third of domestic abuse crimes are against men.

In the current exceptional circumstances relating to COVID-19 and the need for social distancing and self-isolation, there are also genuine concerns that the incidences of domestic abuse will substantially increase and that victims will find it even more difficult to access the support and assistance that they so desperately need. Only this morning, figures released by the Police Service show that in the first three weeks of April, since the lockdown began, 1,919 calls have been received. That is an increase, on average, of 200 for a three-week period. Therefore, although crime has been falling in other areas — whether it is road traffic collisions — when it comes to domestic abuse, those crimes are increasing. Again, that reflects only those crimes that are being reported.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for giving way. He rightly raised the point about the potential rise in domestic abuse, I have had contact with Women's Aid and with Hourglass — formerly Action on Elder Abuse Northern Ireland — and we have to recognise that elder abuse is domestic violence. I do not like the differentiation between the descriptions. Does the Member agree that it is right and proper that organisations such as Women's Aid and Hourglass are properly funded, given that they are expecting a downfall of up to 50% in their charitable funding and an increase of up to 50% in the need for their services and that, because of the pandemic, many victims are trapped in their homes and, until the restrictions start are lifted, may not even be able to access the help that they so desperately need?

Mr Givan: The Member makes her point very well. I know that the point has been raised and that the Minister is also aware of it and is engaging with the different voluntary organisations that provide that support. Women's Aid is one such organisation that does great work. It is important that they get the support that they need, given the increased prevalence of that type of abuse and crime that is now taking place. I know that, in Great Britain, there has also been an increase. That increase has also manifested in increased murder rates. Often, it starts with domestic abuse and leads ultimately, tragically, to murder. Figures now show that that has happened in other jurisdictions. We need to be alert to that issue. I will come back to it when I make further remarks in my capacity as an individual Member.

It is important to recognise that domestic abuse is not limited only to physical abuse, horrific as that might be, and is usually not focused on one single incident but rather occurs over a period of time and includes a range of behaviours. Psychological abuse in the form of coercive and controlling behaviour can be just as pernicious as physical violence. Indeed, victims say that the impact of psychological abuse can be much greater and longer lasting. There is usually a slow transition, with victims realising only afterwards that the abnormal has become normalised to the extent that they do not recognise it as abusive behaviour. The controlling behaviour leads to lack of self-worth, loss of identity and dependency on the perpetrator, which is exploited with impunity.

The need for robust legislation to provide the necessary tools for statutory justice agencies to tackle domestic violence and abuse, take into account patterns of such behaviour over time and bring the perpetrators to justice is abundantly clear. At its meeting on 2 April, the Committee for Justice received an oral briefing on the Bill by departmental officials and discussed a range of issues. I thank the Department for providing that briefing. I appreciate that we are trying to limit our business due to the COVID-19 response. However, it is important that we continue to deal with pressing issues, of which that is one example.

The Minister outlined that the Bill provides for a new domestic abuse offence that focuses on non-physical abusive behaviour, which includes coercive control. Northern Ireland is currently the only part of the United Kingdom that is without legislation that criminalises such behaviour. Given the part that it plays in domestic abuse, without the inclusion of psychological, emotional and control issues along with physical damage, the police and legal system cannot support victims adequately and protect them from further abuse. The new offence

is, therefore, to be welcomed. However, the Committee will wish to ensure that the new offence enhances existing legislation and, together with the conditions and description of abusive behaviour, is framed appropriately, addresses any gaps in current provision fully and is workable.

The Committee explored a number of issues with officials, including any potential difficulties with clause 12, which provides for a defence where a person can show that the course of behaviour was reasonable and, if a perpetrator uses court as a weapon against the victim — for example, by going back to court regularly or over a long period when they receive legal-aid funding and the victim does not — whether such behaviour can be considered in the context of abusive behaviour. The sort of crimes that would fall under clause 13 and whether a perpetrator could be charged and/or convicted of both were also discussed.

Domestic abuse can also have a devastating impact on the children who are involved. Experience shows that such behaviour can be replicated across generations if the cycle is not broken.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt the Member. The Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. When we return, the Chairperson of the Committee for Justice will be able to conclude his remarks. Thank you, Members.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I invite the Chairperson of the Committee to complete his contribution.

Mr Givan: I will pick up from where I left off. Domestic abuse can have a devastating impact on the children involved, and experience shows that such behaviour can be replicated across generations if the cycle is not broken. The inclusion of aggravators in relation to a child in the Bill is, therefore, a welcome measure.

I turn to the provisions aimed at reducing the potential for a perpetrator to use the criminal justice system or the family court system to further abuse the victim. Victims frequently cite examples of abusers using the legal system and the court processes to continue the abuse, even after they have left the relationship and are trying to build a new life for themselves. It is essential to ensure that victims of domestic abuse are not revictimised by contact with the criminal justice process and that victims have their needs taken into account at appropriate points in the process. The provisions that prohibit a person charged with domestic abuse from trial by jury, ensure special measures for the protection of witnesses in domestic abuse criminal proceedings and prevent the cross-examination of witnesses by persons accused of domestic abuse in criminal proceedings and in family proceedings will assist and support victims to give their best evidence. I note that Lord Justice Gillen, in his review of family justice, recommended such a measure for family proceedings.

Members also raised issues with officials that are currently not covered in the Bill, including domestic violence protection orders that could be applied for by the police and not just the victim; provision for special leave and time off work where domestic abuse is taking place; the granting of secure tenancies; and legislative provision to enable the Police Service to notify schools of domestic abuse incidents so that teachers are aware of the trauma that a child may have suffered the night before. I am sure that the Committee will wish to explore all of those issues and others at Committee Stage, which we have agreed to give priority to, assuming that it passes Second Stage today.

While I appreciate the Minister's wish for the Bill to pass through its stages as quickly as possible and am happy to assure her that the Committee will not take any more time than it requires, we will want to undertake robust and detailed scrutiny, take evidence from key stakeholders and, most importantly, hear the views of victims of domestic abuse to ensure that the legislative provisions are as effective as possible. Normally, a Committee could take up to six months to carry out its scrutiny work, but I intend to bring forward proposals to the Committee for a much shorter time frame. It has been talked about that this could become law and pass the relevant stages in spring of next year: I hope that it will be by the end of this year, if not before, and I will bring forward proposals in due course to facilitate that.

In preparation for the scrutiny of the legislation, the Committee has considered a research paper prepared by the Assembly's Research and Information Service on different approaches taken to criminalise coercive control in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It has

commissioned a further research paper on other domestic abuse-related legislative developments.

The provisions in the Bill closely mirror the Scottish legislation, which has been described by Professor Evan Stark — an internationally renowned expert on coercive control who briefed the previous Justice Committee in June 2016 on domestic abuse — as the new “gold standard” for criminalising coercive control and domestic abuse. Our aim must be to achieve at least the same, if not better, with this Bill. While the legislation will not solve all of the issues relating to domestic abuse and any effective response will require adequately resourced support to facilitate a victim's exit from a relationship and maintain their safety together with preventative measures, such as education programmes, it will improve the position.

The Department has advised the Committee that the Attorney General has informally expressed some reservations on competence-related areas in two aspects of the Bill: whether the new offence being drafted is sufficiently foreseeable and whether the criminalisation of behaviour occurring outside the United Kingdom forms part of the law of a country other than Northern Ireland. We will want to keep a watching brief on that area to ensure that the position is resolved satisfactorily before the Bill completes its passage through the Assembly. At this stage, as Chairman of the Committee, I want to indicate that the Committee and I support the principles behind the Bill.

I wish to make some comments in my capacity as a Member for Lagan Valley. Domestic abuse is an area on which all of us will have received representation or, indeed, may have had experience of. We may have family members who have endured domestic abuse in its various manifestations. I have heard at first hand from constituents who have suffered abuse of the most appalling nature. One example included physical and psychological abuse that children witnessed. It involved custody battles and court processes being used. It involved attempts to drive the victim to bankruptcy over land and property. That has had a hugely detrimental impact. The individual concerned has been able to get on with their life as best they can, but they will never have a normal life, as a result of the abuse that they have received.

It is an issue that we as, as Members, will, I know, take seriously and that we need to address. The Bill gives us an opportunity to do that. There are some aspects of the Bill that we will want to look at in more detail, including what it means to be “personally connected”. In Scotland, it relates only to partners or former partners, regardless of whether they live together. In England, family members are included, whilst partners not living together are excluded. The Northern Ireland Bill covers all those categories. We will want to look, as a party, at what it means. We need to get the definition right. We want to look at the scope of abusive behaviour. It is important, when considering abusive behaviour, that the Bill have teeth and effect when it comes to prosecution. We need to ensure that the legislation that prosecution is based on will provide the circumstances in which a successful prosecution can be made and that there is no ambiguity or the scope is so wide that the successful conviction of perpetrators is difficult. The scope of abusive behaviour is something that we will want to look at.

Another aspect that I want to flag up at this stage is the defence on grounds of “reasonableness” in clause 12.

What does that mean? Define what it is to be “reasonable” for a defence to be provided. We will want to look at that in more detail.

Getting convictions for coercive control is something that we have not been able to do. The Minister highlighted that. Where the law has been in existence in England and Wales, for example, in the calendar year of 2017, there were 468 prosecutions and eight cautions for coercive or controlling behaviour. Two hundred and thirty-five offenders were convicted, and 223 were sentenced for the offence. For those sentenced to prison, the average sentence was 17 months. That demonstrates that there is a clear need and that there can be prosecutions for this type of offence. It already happens in other jurisdictions. We have not been able to do that, because, when the Assembly was brought down, this was one of the casualties. Legislation was going through the Assembly, but there were those who decided that it was better to bring the institution down than to keep it going. As a result, there are people who would have been convicted and imprisoned for this type of offence, had this place still been going. We can never allow a situation to return where victims pay the price of this institution not being up and running.

When we consider the impact of COVID-19, the regulations that are in place and the restrictions that are being placed on people, we note an increased number of calls to the police about domestic abuse. We have clearly communicated a message that we are to stay at home, save lives and protect the NHS, but, for victims of domestic abuse, staying at home means to be abused and not to have the opportunity to escape that abuse, because there is a fear that, when they, out of necessity, cannot be in that environment, they somehow jeopardise the wider public good. It is important that the message starts to get out that the lockdown, in those terms, has consequences. The core objective is to save lives from COVID-19 and ensure that the NHS is not overwhelmed. When these draconian measures were introduced, they were modelled against a fatality rate of 15,000, at one point, then 3,000 and then 1,500. I understand the need for the draconian measures that were taken at the time, but they must be proportionate to achieving the core objective. The price that is being paid — not just on so many facets of public life — has a real impact when it comes to the victims of domestic abuse. When the Executive and the Minister of Health carry out their next review of the continuation of the current regulations, I am sure that they will be cognisant of the wider ramifications that they have on so many other aspects of life. I will contain my remarks to the impact that they have on those who suffer domestic abuse. The home has become a prison for many people, and they see no hope of getting out of it for as long as we continue with a message of lockdown and no conversation about what it looks like to get out of this.

We need to start giving people hope, because, in the absence of hope, there is increased concern about people’s mental health. I have received representation from people about their concerns about their mental health because of the abuse that they have to sustain in the home. I am concerned about how that could subsequently manifest itself. Battles are taking place about access to children, and there are custody issues, where one parent believes that another parent is not looking after their child properly. That creates further tension in relationships. We

need to make sure that our proposals are measured and proportionate.

There is some resumption of “normal business” in some areas — public and private. Courts are starting to take on work that they had stopped to focus on complying with regulations; the health service is starting to carry out other business that it had stopped to focus on COVID-19; and parks and cemeteries are reopening. Steps are being taken that indicate that some efforts are being made, but there is a concern that there is an inconsistency when it comes to the “Stay at home” message and those who suffer domestic abuse. It is vital that we get a consistent approach to the measures that are taken as we seek to move into what the “new normal” will look like. The new normal cannot be victims of domestic abuse being locked in their home and having to endure further abuse from the perpetrator. That cannot be tolerable, and we need to take cognisance of that as we move forward with the measures that are being taken.

People do not see the justification for off-licences being permitted to stay open, for example, and the increased sales of alcohol, which are higher than they are in normal circumstances. Off-licences are open, but the message on other aspects is, “Stay at home”. I understand why that is vital, but a price is being paid by people who are forced to stay at home when they suffer domestic abuse. Logic and rationality need to be applied. We are sitting in the Chamber: we are socially distanced, complying with public health advice and able to carry out some normal business. There are buildings much bigger than this. There are churches much bigger than this that are not allowed to open even for solitary individuals to go in to pray. Questions are being asked about the consistency of the approach that is being taken. If we do not have a consistent approach, we will start to lose the people, because they will not see it as being proportionate and having a rational basis and justification for its application.

I make that point in the spirit in which it is meant. We need to be very much aware of the price that is being paid in our efforts to protect lives in the pandemic that we are having to deal with.

2.15 pm

I look forward, if I can put it that way, to getting into the detail, but I know that it will be very difficult. When members hear that evidence at the Committee, it will challenge us. That will create its own pressures for members, but we are ultimately responsible for having to remain very clear-eyed and focused on producing effective legislation that is robust and can meet its ultimate objective of protecting people, reducing the incidences and, where there are prosecutions, that it is grounded in effective legislation that we secure those prosecutions. It cannot be so broad and so wide to be symbolic in nature that it loses the actual impact that it needs when the court processes are engaged.

Ms Dillon: I do not propose to repeat everything that has been said. I am sure that a lot of what we will say here today will be or could potentially be repetitive because, thankfully, most parties in the Chamber are on the same page in relation to the Bill. We are very supportive of the Bill and are grateful to the Minister for bringing it forward. We are grateful to the previous Justice Minister for the work that was done on it also. That can only be a positive.

I agree with much of what Paul said in his opening remarks, particularly around the content of the Bill. I probably agree with him also in relation to the fact that those victims of domestic violence find themselves in a prison at this time with the perpetrators, and that is not acceptable. So, maybe when we move forward, those are the kind of things that need to be our priority. When we come out of this, is it those sections of people, is it those who suffer from mental ill health, is it young people who are in very difficult home situations who need to be looked at first? That is not something that we have to discuss in this Chamber right now. Those decisions will be taken by our Executive, but we could make those proposals to our Ministers and Executive. There is nothing to prevent us from doing so.

I thank the Minister for bringing this forward. I am glad that we are in the situation now where we can move forward with it. Even in the very difficult circumstances that we are in, the Committee has given a strong commitment and the Chair has outlined that we will move forward in as timely a manner as is possible, but we need to get this legislation right. It is not good enough to come out at the end of this and say, "We are all wonderful. We passed this Bill. We did what we said we would do" if it is not effective and it is not going to meet the needs of the victims. For that reason, we need to listen to the organisations that represent them, whether it be Women's Aid, the Men's Advisory Project or any other organisation, and very particularly and specifically, as has been outlined, the victims themselves, because lived experience in any of these issues has to be what guides us in what we deliver. The lived experience will tell us what will meet the needs of those victims. This legislation, at least, is only one part of that.

I am hopeful that the Minister will work very closely with all her Executive colleagues in relation to addressing domestic abuse because this is not just about bringing forward legislation and creating the circumstances in which people can be imprisoned for carrying out this kind of abuse. It is about, first of all, trying to prevent it. It is about education. It is about educating ourselves, first of all, it is about educating those around us and educating our young people as to what a healthy relationship looks like and what an unhealthy relationship looks like.

As has been outlined, very often, for young people who grow up in homes with families who have unhealthy relationships, that is their normal. We talk about the new normal in relation to coronavirus, but that is the normal for many of those young people. Those unhealthy relationships, whether it is physical or psychological torture or sexual abuse, it is their normal, and it is very difficult to break that cycle. We need, as an Executive and as a Government, to find a way to break that cycle. I do not want to be at the point where we have to enforce the legislation, where we have to put people in prison. I want to be at the point where we stop abuse from happening in the first place. Therefore, for me, there needs to be a big focus on that, and this legislation gives us an opportunity to have those conversations. We can no longer have Ministers working in silos on these issues. We talk about Ministers needing to work together on mental health — this is the same. We need to have a proper, good and robust strategy on domestic abuse.

The Minister said earlier that maximum sentences would most likely be applied in cases where there is this type

of coercive control in conjunction with physical violence, and I understand why that might be the case. However, I do not necessarily accept it, because we have seen many examples where a hand has never been lifted during the entire relationship — it has been coercive control the whole way through it — and, very often, those are the cases that end up in murder. People ask, "How did that happen?", and they never raised their hand and there was never any physical violence, but that is because they had the control. The minute that they lost that control is when they went to the other extreme. They never did the in-between. Therefore, we need to make sure that those who are the perpetrators of very serious coercive control do actually receive the maximum sentences, even if they have never carried out any acts of physical violence because it is equally as bad. Some of what has been said about what victims have said will tell you that, for some, it is worse. We need to look at all those issues.

As a Committee, we will look at the detail of the Bill. Again, some of the issues have been raised here. I understand what the Minister said about the orders and notices and not wanting to delay this Bill, but, again, we want to get it right. I want to make sure that when we come out the other side of this, we have a Bill that will genuinely and effectively meet the needs of victims. I have some concern that the notices and orders do not feature in the Bill. I know that the Minister said that she will include them in the miscellaneous Bill, and I do not doubt her intention. However, I am concerned that, with everything that is going on with coronavirus, and we do not know when that will end, and then we will have Brexit, we could end up in a position where the miscellaneous Bill does not get introduced in this mandate. However, I accept that it is very much the Minister's intention that it will, but what the reality will be, I do not know.

Therefore, the notices and orders, for me, are extremely important. One of the issues that I have met repeatedly when dealing with victims of domestic abuse, and other types of issues as well, is around non-molestation orders. In cases of domestic abuse in particular, the non-molestation orders are not working. They are not effective. First, because many of the people who need them most cannot afford to get them. Furthermore, where they do succeed in putting a non-molestation order in place, the perpetrators can bring them back to court very quickly after it has been put in place, which means greater cost, and, very often, the orders are removed very quickly. They have been very ineffective to date in many of the cases that I have been dealing with for constituents and with people who I know. My main concern is that the notices and orders could possibly be a way to give victims the space that they need to get things in order, meaning that they could leave their home or stay in it in a safe way.

For me, this is not about punishment. It is about protecting life. It is about protecting victims. It is about protecting families. Therefore, when you send the perpetrator of this type of abuse to prison, although there is a punishment element — the perpetrator will feel that it is very much a punishment — for me, it is about protecting the victim. It is about ensuring that the perpetrator can no longer carry out those kinds of activities against that victim. That protective element needs to be recognised, first and foremost. That is why, for me, the public orders and notices are very important, Minister. Obviously, as a Committee, we have an opportunity to bring forward amendments, and as

individuals. I would prefer not to. I would prefer us to have a good Bill that we can all support and not to have to make amendments to that.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has included the protection that families, children and victims cannot be cross-examined by a perpetrator. That is very welcome. As a party, we responded to the consultation to say that we would support that.

In the round, this is a good Bill. We will, I imagine, support most of what is in it, but we will have to scrutinise it. Paul is right: we will need to look at it to see whether it is all doable and will give the best outcomes. As a Committee, we will ensure that we scrutinise the Bill in a timely manner. We gave that commitment to the Minister, and she has welcomed that we will do that. In taking evidence, we are faced with difficult circumstances, but we will meet those challenges and make sure that we get evidence. As I outlined, we need to meet the needs of the victims and ensure that what we come out with at the other end is something that will let them say, "I have faith now that, if I go to the police or the authorities, I will get the outcome that I need to protect me and my family and to ensure that the perpetrator is held to account."

We support the Bill.

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome the Bill. Like Paul Givan, I regret the length of time that it has taken. There was much ambition in the 2015 Justice miscellaneous Bill that some of the provisions contained in this legislation would have been in statute long before now. It is right that, over the last number of months, we listened to the key stakeholders, because we were much tempted to piggyback on the Westminster legislation in the absence of a devolved Assembly. It is right and proper that this legislature takes account of the stakeholders and the people of this jurisdiction and puts in place legislation that responds to their concerns. Minister, I welcome your speedy response in making this one of the key priorities of your time in office.

There are a couple of points that I want to pick up on, but first I would like some clarity. I understood that the protection orders and notices were already in statute as a result of the 2015 legislation, but that the guidance on that had not been effected because of the suspension of the Assembly. That was one of the responses that I received from the PSNI in the last couple of years when I asked why it had not been enacted. One of the things that prompted me to ask about the protection notices and orders was the number of children who had to flee their homes, along with the mother, while the perpetrator was often able to stay in the family home. There was little by way of refuge for the family. In 2014, something like 11,000 or 14,000 children had to flee alongside a parent.

Minister, I am conscious that legislation is one thing, but we need to put some money behind it. Non-legislative arrangements need to be supported, whether it is Women's Aid, refuges or Barnardo's. Those are key organisations that play a vital role in protecting women and in helping to achieve better outcomes for the children who are impacted by domestic abuse and violence. I am grateful to Barnardo's for its policy briefing paper. One of the points that it raises is that children learn what they see and live with. There are issues about how we can break the cycle of violence if we do not put in proper care

and counselling and commit to improving outcomes for children who have witnessed domestic violence. Like other Members who spoke on this, I am conscious of the rise, during the lockdown, in the number of domestic abuse incidents that have been reported to the police. It is probably vastly under-reported. I heard from some district policing areas that some of the reports that have come through are from older children who are in the family home as a consequence of lockdown and have seen the abuse.

A great deal of work has been done over the last few years by many organisations and individuals to highlight the scar of domestic abuse and violence in society. In the past, it has been very much a taboo subject. Work has been done, and there is a lot more to do.

2.30 pm

I welcome the cross-jurisdictional nature of the legislation, Minister, at clause 10. If abusers think that they can carry on abuse somewhere outside of Northern Ireland and that they will not be chased, I welcome clause 10, which gives them no hiding place. That is essential.

Others have made reference to a register of domestic abuse offenders. I wonder what your thoughts are on that, because the sex offenders register has, I think, proven itself to be a critical tool in moderating in some way, and certainly in keeping tabs on, some of the worst sexual offenders.

As Members have referred to, the legislation is much more widespread in terms of the relationship definition, if you like, to which domestic abuse can apply, and I welcome that.

I welcome the Minister's reference to the Gillen report and her having taken on board some of the recommendations of that very comprehensive report.

Minister, there were one or two other points that I wanted to make around investment in Women's Aid and the refuge and whether you can share with the Assembly any commitments in the forthcoming budget for additional moneys to support women and children who have been abused. I have felt for a long time that, while a lot of lip service is paid and lots of tears are shed at the plight of some, when it comes to resourcing, specialists in that field, very often, are left to scratch around annually for charitable donations and the crumbs off the Executive's table. So the Minister certainly would have my and my party's support as regards any forthcoming budget statement, because we want to see money included to help implement the legislation and to resource people affected by domestic violence and abuse.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Justice Minister for driving this Bill forward. Certainly, her words painted a very vivid picture of domestic abuse and domestic violence, but I guess none of us really knows just how bad it is unless we have been intimately involved with it.

I want to make some general points, briefly, about the here and now, the Bill itself and what will happen in the future. I remember reading a tweet, not so long ago, which I found mildly amusing. It said:

"Open the pubs before we all become alcoholics."

There is a point behind that, which is that off-licence sales of alcohol have increased threefold since we went into

lockdown. So there is a real problem in the here and now, because alcohol feeds domestic abuse in that environment. It is something that we have to look at, because domestic abuse has increased since we went into lockdown, and 90% of children in a violent home know that violence is taking place; 75% of those children have seen the violence taking place and 27% have been the subject of that violence; they have had violence perpetrated against them. That is the here and now that I am talking about.

Justice cannot just sit in a holding pattern as this goes on, while we all wait for this Bill to come in. We have to do something. The Justice Minister alluded to speaking to statutory agencies about what we are doing about the increase in domestic violence now, and I would be keen to hear a little bit more detail about what that actually means. What is actually happening? What is the Justice Minister doing right now as part of this COVID-19 crisis?

There are some general points that I would like to mention, bearing in mind that we are going to scrutinise this. I absolutely agree with Paul and Linda that there is time to really get into the weeds as regards this, and we will do so in the coming months to drive this forward. I really hope we can do that and have it put into legislation by the end of the year.

There is a discussion to be had about a commissioner, whether it is a commissioner for domestic violence or a commissioner for the victims of crime. I have mentioned this before, and I do not apologise for mentioning it again, but we need a commissioner for victims of crime in general. If we look at it, we can see that we have a Children's Commissioner, and children are subject to domestic violence so there is a link there. We have a Commissioner for Older People, and older people are subject to domestic violence as well. We are going to have a mental health champion thanks to our Health Minister, Robin Swann, and a long campaign fought by my colleague Mike Nesbitt. Of course, the police deal with the homicides that come out of domestic violence. So, there is a place for a commissioner, whether it is a domestic violence commissioner or a commissioner for the victims of crime; I would rather go for the latter.

I am really pleased that people have talked about domestic violence against males, because all too often that is forgotten. Paul Givan brought out the stat that one in three domestic violence crimes are perpetrated against men. In a previous life, I had dealings with men who had been subjected to domestic violence. It is insidious and strips them of their dignity. While we all know that the vast majority of people who fall foul of domestic violence are female — and we do not belittle that — we have to always ensure that males are not forgotten. Much of the abuse against males is due to their older children physically, verbally and financially abusing them, which is something that we must look at. We must promote the men's advisory project; somewhere that they can go to get help, get advice and get one-on-one counselling. Again, that is not promoted as much as it should be, and we should be doing more in the Assembly to try to promote that.

Moving on briefly to my very last point — I did say that I would be brief — how do we resource this once it has all been put in place? Who are the people dealing with these issues? For the most part, the police deal with it first. I have seen how the police deal with it, and it affects individual police officers. Where we must scrutinise

our police force — and we do; they are one of the most scrutinised police forces in the United Kingdom — we must be careful to not undermine them, because if we undermine the police force, we lose their credibility. If they lose their credibility among victims, there will be a trust issue, which we do not want.

The other issue that we must be really mindful of is that we have cut our police force to the bone; we are asking them to do more and more, and when this Bill is passed there will be more work for our police officers to do, yet we are cutting their funding. So, we must look at the resource issue. Dolores mentioned other agencies that need resources — of course, it is all about money — but the police cannot be forgotten. We need to make sure that we can resource our police force, not just in numbers but in skills and in training so that they can take this on. Once we put this into statute and it is out there, the process does not end; we have to make sure that we can apply it and do so properly so that we can help the victims of domestic violence. If we do not, it will just be a piece of legislation that is sitting getting dusty in a corner somewhere. So, we must make sure that we resource our police force correctly.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: Absolutely.

Mrs D Kelly: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member's call for proper resourcing of the police, but does he not share my alarm that the current Budget proposal gives the police only a 3% inflationary uplift, which will only allow them to stand still and will not bring the number of officers up to the level that they need and that Patten stipulated?

Mr Beattie: The Member is absolutely right. I did not want to get too sidetracked from what we are talking about in regard to the Bill, but the Member is absolutely right; if we do not look at that resource, we are going to fail in what we are trying to achieve here. To see that our police force has been cut more than any other police force in the United Kingdom is difficult to watch and has an effect on morale.

As the Ulster Unionist Party's justice spokesperson, I can stand here and wholeheartedly say that we will vigorously support the domestic violence Bill. We will support the Justice Minister in all that she is trying to do in achieving that and, at the same time, we will, along with the Chair and the deputy Chair of the Justice Committee, make sure that the Bill is scrutinised so that the end product meets what we want it to meet and that we have the resources in place to make sure that it works for victims.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which was introduced by the Justice Minister, Naomi Long. I commend the Minister for delivering this important legislation in such a timely manner and in line with her commitment to deliver a safe and shared Northern Ireland for all.

The focus of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly is, of course, on the emergency response to COVID-19 but it is important that Ministers continue to progress important priorities such as tackling domestic violence, the impact of which, we know, is likely to increase during the social isolation that is vital to preventing the transmission of coronavirus and saving life. I thank the Justice Minister for her work and that of her Department to

progress this important legislation during this challenging time.

I also wish to thank previous Justice Ministers for their work to initiate the legislation prior to the collapse of the DUP/Sinn Féin Executive in 2017. I pay tribute to the many organisations that are working to support victims and survivors of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.

The domestic and sexual abuse helpline has reported a 13% increase in calls during the coronavirus social isolation, but the introduction of this legislation sends a clear message that perpetrators of domestic violence and coercive control will be brought to justice in Northern Ireland and that victims are not alone or forgotten. I support the Justice Minister's call for anyone who is suffering from domestic abuse to contact the 24/7 helpline to access support.

As the Justice Minister has stated, we must change our perspective on domestic abuse. It can happen to anyone, it can be committed by anyone and it is unacceptable in whatever form it may take. It is not just about physical violence, and it is welcome to see the creation of a new offence that criminalises patterns of non-physical behaviour that are coercive and controlling and which amount to psychological, emotional or financial abuse.

As Alliance Party education spokesperson and chair of the all-party Assembly group on children and young people, I particularly welcome the legislation's response to the serious impact of domestic abuse on children. Seeing, hearing or being present during an incident of domestic abuse can profoundly affect the physical and mental health and well-being of a child for life. Everyone deserves to live in a safe and secure home and I welcome the provisions of the legislation, particularly clauses 8 and 9, to make that a more likely outcome for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

The NSPCC is clear: witnessing domestic violence is child abuse. I welcome that the Bill creates an aggravated offence, which will apply if a child sees, hears or is present during a single incident of domestic abuse. Women's Aid and Barnardo's have referred to children as the hidden or forgotten victims of domestic abuse and it is important, therefore, that the Bill —

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Yes, I am happy to give way.

Ms Dillon: I just wanted to ask that the Minister look at Operation Encompass. The PSNI has told us that the reason it cannot contact a school after a domestic violence incident is that there is a legislative gap. If there a way in which the Bill can fill that gap, we should look at that. Operation Encompass has proven to be a very useful tool in that the police can contact a school before 8:00 am when a domestic incident has happened, and that leads to greater protection of children when they go into school, because the school knows the circumstances that the child has suffered on the previous evening.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for her intervention. It is, of course, important that the legislation recognises the various ways in which children and young people can be victims of such abhorrent crime.

Children can be used by abusers to exert emotional, psychological or financial abuse against a partner or ex-

partner. Children can be victims of emotional or physical abuse and are particularly vulnerable to serious harm at key stages of early childhood development.

2.45 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. My point relates specifically to his last remark about children being used by perpetrators of domestic abuse. Obviously, we all share the concern that lockdown means that a lot of children are locked in and are witnessing domestic violence and are stuck in the middle of domestic abuse. I go back to his point about children being used and the concept of parental alienation. I have no doubt that, in some instances, the lockdown is being used by perhaps a resident parent to reinforce and re-entrench, on the children, their negative views of the absent parent. Does the Member have any views on that or on whether parental alienation should be included in the definition of domestic abuse?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. Undoubtedly, reports suggest that contact arrangements with children are being disrupted or refused, despite guidance that such contact should proceed with social distancing measures in place. It is important that we respond to that challenge at this time and, indeed, that legislation rules out that type of treatment of children and families in our community.

Young people entering into their first experience of a relationship can also experience abuse from a partner. Domestic abuse is, of course, not confined to the home.

Research identifies that such domestic abuse is an adverse childhood experience and a contributing factor to a wide range of issues, such as educational underachievement, exclusion, youth homelessness and engagement in risk-taking behaviour. Children and young people cannot be expected to understand or cope with such abuse, and it is, therefore, a duty on the Executive, the Assembly, agencies and society to protect them from it.

We must heed the concerns expressed by charities, such as Women's Aid and Barnardo's, that abusers may take advantage of the public health emergency and that many children in abusive homes are currently without the safe space of school, notwithstanding the distance pastoral care that dedicated teachers, youth workers and counsellors are providing. The Men's Advisory Project is also reporting an increase in calls from male victims of domestic abuse and has mentioned that many fathers are having contact with children disrupted or refused. It is important that we continue to advise of the Men's Advisory Project helpline that is available for support for male victims of domestic abuse in our community.

We must, therefore, ensure that home is always the safest place for everyone, including during this public health emergency. The legislation is an important action to help us achieve that aim.

Mr Frew: I support the Bill. It is a very good day for Northern Ireland that we are at the Bill's Second Stage. It would be remiss of the House not to mention some people who have been successful in the past to get it here. I mention, of course, my colleague Claire Sugden, who worked tirelessly as a Minister in order to get the Bill to the House and, through no fault of her own, was not able to proceed.

It became clear in Claire's time as a Minister that she was willing and very able to work in partnership with the Justice Committee, which I chaired, to produce legislation that would have been fit for purpose and would have protected lives and made lives better and safer. We had arranged, at that time, that the Justice Committee would work on a piece on stalking, whilst the Minister took forward the domestic violence piece. After that legislation was passed, the stalking piece, with the Committee having done its investigatory work and reports, would have been handed over to the Department, and it would have progressed a stalking Bill. That all still needs to be done. And in that time — that vacuum — there have been more victims, there has been more misery and there have been more children witnessing violence in their own homes. It must be said in this House that it is a shame that we have not been able to progress that Bill and bring that legislation into action. What we should be doing now, actually, is reviewing the implementation of the legislation, how well it has done and what bits have not worked. We are behind, and that means that we have failed. We have failed the victims of domestic violence, and it is not good enough. It is not good enough. That is why we have to make sure that we are here to legislate and to do the job that we are meant to be doing. I am glad to see this day.

I know that civil servants do not usually like to be named, but it would be remiss of me not to name Veronica Holland, who has done tremendous work, through all the difficult years that I have just described, to assist the Minister and provide the Department with expertise in order to bring this Bill to the House today. Veronica is very proactive, amenable and approachable; she will work with you. There are times when I argue with Veronica, and she knows that too well. There are times when she has to enact policy that I do not agree with — indeed, am completely opposed to. But she will always treat you with fairness and respect, and I hope that I have always been able to treat the Civil Service and the Department of Justice with the same respect that I have received. So I thank the people I have mentioned, and of course Veronica's team, who have worked around her to produce and publish this Bill. Obviously, people do not work in silos, and one person could not have produced this piece of work on their own.

It is important, now that we are here and it is a good day, and now that we have legislation for domestic violence, that this legislature does its job — that we scrutinise this piece of legislation, well meaning and well needed as it is, to make sure that it is the best possible piece of legislation. That is why the Justice Committee, like all Committees of this House, has to take the role of scrutiniser very importantly. I am also mindful that there are many in the House who do not sit on the Justice Committee but who will also want, and have, a massive say in that.

I thank the Minister for her speed in bringing this legislation to the House, despite all of the difficulties around the virus and everything else that we are contending with. However, I repeat Linda's point about the completeness of this legislation. Minister, I am not sure if you were in the House at the time, but my colleague Dolores Kelly and I brought amendments to the Justice (No. 2) Bill in good faith. We did not move them, because we were given guarantees and assurances that they would be legislated for very quickly. They were around protection orders and coercive control. Through no fault of the Minister, they have not been enacted. There is that warning for us all: if we think

we need to do something, then we really need to do it, and as quickly as possible.

There is no better piece of legislation to enact some of the things that we are talking about than a domestic violence Bill. In order to get completeness, therefore, Minister, please consider the voices in this Chamber when they talk about possible amendments, because the chances are that, if the Department does not word the amendments, the Assembly team will, whether it is through a Committee amendment or a private Member's amendment. That is healthy; it is a very healthy place to be in as a legislator. Whilst we want to pass this legislation as quickly as possible, anyone can stick in an amendment at Consideration Stage, so it does not really slow down the process as such, but surely it is always better that the Department do it than a Member.

I say that to the Minister and the Department.

Before I move on to the detail of the Bill, I must say that I also worry —

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will.

Mr Givan: He is right in saying that individual Members can bring forward their own amendments, and I have no doubt that some will. Previous experience of the Justice Committee, which the Member has chaired and which I chaired once before, informs me that Committees have successfully scrutinised individual Members' amendments. If individual Members are going to be bringing forward amendments, I, as Chair of the Committee, would encourage that that happen sooner rather than later. The Committee can then carry out scrutiny work and get advice on the amendments. Ultimately, it can agree on what become Committee amendments, if the Department is not prepared to take them on. In the past, the Justice Committee has been quite successful with the Committee amendments that it has brought forward, with or without the support of the Department.

Mr Frew: I thank the Chair for his contribution. He makes a very valid and important point about scrutiny. It is always best if we can get to scrutinise draft amendments as early as possible. As the Chair said, there is an onus on Members to get their thinking caps on and move sooner rather than later, in order to give us all, including the House, a chance to scrutinise any amendments.

I will talk about the police. I am concerned when I hear the timelines for implementation from the Department. The Minister outlined them herself at the Committee. She said that it will take about a year for the legislation to be embedded in the police's psyche. When I speak to the police, however, they tell me that it should not take that long. In fact, they will be keeping an eye on proceedings as the Bill goes through the House. I would therefore like to think that a year is a very conservative guess and that things will be enacted much quicker.

I issue a warning, however, because we have had legislation passed in the House before that has not been effected and not had the rigorous and robust implementation that it should have had. I am talking about the child protection disclosure scheme. I am so annoyed and frustrated that we are still waiting for a relaunch of that scheme, which will do much to protect children. It is a number of years now since that legislation was brought

in. As such, there are warnings there for us to ensure that, when the legislation is enacted, the spirit of the Bill is implemented robustly and that it will help and protect victims and society.

I know that a lot of people have grappled with the issue since we first started to debate coercive control. I am talking about elected Members and society, but the judiciary has also grappled with the problem of what coercive control looks like, how we can legislate for it and how we can enforce it. Those are all valid questions that people have been asking themselves over the past number of years. One of the tools that could be used, which the police are now using, is the body-worn camera, especially as coercive control is very much a cumulative offence, whereby instances of behaviour that might not have been deemed a crime before are counted up. It is the telltale signs. It is the body language, and the language itself: what is said and also what is not said. The body-worn camera could be a great tool for providing evidence that will help safeguard victims and convict perpetrators.

We want to make sure that the legislation is the best that it can be, but we also want it to work on the ground. We want to ensure that everybody has buy-in and knows how to use the legislation to its best effect. There is absolutely no way in which we could ever do justice to and pass a domestic violence Bill without tackling the very harsh issue of coercive control. What does it look like? What should it not look like? What is coercive control and what is not coercive control? Those are all things that we need to grapple with as we scrutinise the legislation.

I think that it was Linda who raised this point. There is absolutely no doubt that perpetrators do not necessarily have to lift a hand, or they have to lift a hand only once, for the threat to be embedded. There is also the threat of using family members, such as using a son or daughter against the victim. There is the threat of ensuring that the son or daughter witness the perpetrator beating the victim up or, worse, committing sexual crimes.

The fear that that strikes into a victim cannot be measured. It cannot be measured in bruises. It cannot be measured in the number of black eyes, sore arms, sore legs or even broken bones. It is much more than that. It is much more damaging than that, and it will make the victim subservient to the point where they are not even in control of their body, mind or soul. It rips the heart clean out of you to the point where you do not want even to breathe until the perpetrator tells you to. The House cannot abide that. We cannot allow it to take place in the homes and streets in the towns and villages that we call "home". It cannot happen. It has to stop. The Bill must go some way to stopping it.

3.00 pm

Will we eradicate this sickness, this evil, this sin? No. However, we will try our best to save as many victims as possible and to make sure that children do not grow up in that atmosphere with that threat hanging over them and hanging over a parent. It was, I think, Dolores Kelly who said that, sometimes, people do what they see. We want to break the endless cycle of violence, and we want to do that to the point where we, at least, have hope of eradicating it.

Our job over the next weeks and months is to scrutinise the legislation. There are clauses that I fully support,

100%. There are others that we need clarification on. I will go through them in numerical order. First, clause 3 sets out that it is not necessary for a victim to have actually been harmed or to consider themselves a victim. Listen to what I just said about a victim not wanting even to breathe until they are told to breathe. Their whole mind has been hijacked. They believe what their perpetrator wants them to believe. I understand why there is a clause that says that victims do not have to consider themselves to be victims. In many cases, victims think that it is their fault. The victim thinks, "I have upset the perpetrator. I have done this. This is my fault. Why did I do that? I shouldn't have done that. Why did I go out today? Why did I make a noise in the kitchen? Why did I drop that glass? It's my fault". I understand why a safeguarding clause is needed, but I think that that clause is clause 16. It talks about what "a reasonable person" would think. Clause 3, however, states that it is not necessary for a victim actually to have been harmed. Surely, if a victim has been beaten up, threatened or had perks taken away from them and thinks that it is their fault because they smashed a glass, made a noise or went out for a walk, that is harm. Surely, that is the person being harmed. It is not physical harm; it is worse than that. It is psychological harm. Whilst I understand why you would have a clause to guard against that, it is important that we get it right, so that a perpetrator cannot use this very legislation against a victim. It is important that we seek clarification in Committee to ensure that it is watertight and cannot be used by the perpetrators. I give the Department warning of that; that is why the debate here is useful. I get that victims will not necessarily come forward. They will say that it was their fault and that no harm was caused, but I think that clause 16 covers that by referring to what "a reasonable person" would think about a person's actions and whether crimes have been committed. We have to look at that. Of course, we do not want to leave the legislation open to abuse in any shape or form. That is why we want it to be as tight as possible.

Clause 8 is about the aggravation of the offence where the victim is under the age of 18. Maybe it is just my simple mind, but I will need an explanation of what we mean by that. Surely, there is already legislation in place to protect children. I can understand why we have an aggravation where a child is being used for coercive control, but I will need some explanation of why we have aggravation of the offence where a victim is under the age of 18, given that we also have protections for parents that I 100% agree with. Clause 11 provides that the offence would not apply where a parent is responsible for a child under the age of 18, as child protection arrangements are already in place. Again, maybe it is just my simple mind, but I will need an explanation of what clause 8 means and is designed to do.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am going blind here because my machine has just dropped off and I did not put in the right password. I will try to wing the rest of my speech as best I can.

Clause 13 provides that, if a coercive control offence cannot be proved, an alternative conviction with a lower threshold, like harassment, can be made. Again, I can understand why the clause is here — so that there is a safety net of conviction, to put it that way — but I worry that, if harassment comes with lesser conviction rates and tariffs, it could be used by barristers as some lesser charge: "We will try to get you off the charge of domestic violence and get you on to a harassment charge". What

would that mean for conviction rates? Given what we have read about what domestic violence and coercive control are, can someone explain to me how a person who does not meet the threshold for domestic violence convictions, with the cumulative effect at play, could ever meet the criteria for harassment? That is something that I have been toying with as I have read the legislation. I know that harassment is something completely different — I get that — but, surely, domestic violence is harassment and a lot, lot more.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. It might give him a chance to reopen his locked computer. Would he agree that the very issues that he raises are the types of loopholes that perpetrators would look for in circumstances like this? We all know that one of the primary aspects of coercive control and this type of behavioural instinct is psychological damage. We have heard stories of individuals for whom the psychological impact is so damaging that someone claiming to know more about the substance of such legislation than they do incapacitates them and leaves them in the home feeling hopeless and worthless.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. I got my computer back on. He is also absolutely right: it is such an insidious crime. Most perpetrators know what they are about; they are not stupid. They will use any tool at their disposal to intentionally inflict more pain on their victim. That may mean passage through a court process, whether a family proceeding on the custody of children or with regard to legislation that is designed to convict them. What is to stop a perpetrator who thinks that the police are gaining ground on them and building up a case against them adding to the mix by reporting things to the police against the victim? We have to ensure that this is robust and watertight enough to protect the victims and not be used as a tool. Again, that is very hard. I have a lot of sympathy for the Bill writers and the Minister in that regard. Getting it right will not be easy, but this will happen because there are bad people out there, and these things could well take place where it is used as a weapon, just as children are used. What shame that you would use your child as a tool against your victim. It is insidious. These people are evil, and they need to be stopped. However, I worry about having that inserted. Clause 13 might be a safety net to ensure that people are convicted of something, but, if it allows a step change — a lowering of conviction and lesser sentencing — and barristers and the defence are geared up for that, it could become part of the line. I struggle to find what could be deemed as harassment but not domestic violence if it is in that setting and it is cumulative over a period of weeks and months.

I look forward to our time in Committee scrutinising this. I look forward to getting visits from the Department and the Minister on this and from all the witnesses, all the people who have fought hard to get the legislation in place. I include Men's Advisory Project, Women's Aid, Hourglass, Victim Support, Nexus and all who have contributed and have engaged with the Department for so many years on the issue. We are finally at Second Stage and going into Committee Stage, and I am glad to see this day. Many of us in the House have taken the subject up — this horrible crime — and have run with it and worked with it and tried to make life better for so many people in our society. They should be thankful at this point that we have a Bill going through that, hopefully, will soon be law and will allow

the police to use the full force of the law to keep people as safe as possible. I commend the Bill, and I certainly support it. It is a good day, and I thank the Minister for bringing it forward.

Ms Dolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this much-needed and long-awaited Bill. It is imperative that the Bill protects victims residing in or near border communities as, very often, abuse can happen across both jurisdictions. To this end, I welcome clause 10, which relates to extraterritorial jurisdiction. Essentially, where domestic abuse and abusive behaviour occurs outside this jurisdiction but the accused is normally resident here, that behaviour can be encapsulated as part of the domestic abuse offence. That is important, as it covers incidents that may happen on holiday, which is sometimes where the worst and the first of the abuse can happen. Sinn Féin would like assurances that it will cover abuse that may happen to people living in border communities, where the abuse can often happen across both jurisdictions, including, for example, on nights out or at the victim's place of work.

We also welcome the Bill's recognition of the specific impact of domestic abuse on children, which can lead to adverse childhood experiences and, consequently, have a lasting impact on a child, leading to greater problems down the line. The two aggravators in the Bill where the victim is a child in the context of an intimate relationship or family member or where a child sees, hears or is present in the context of the abusive behaviour are absolutely essential, and we welcome their inclusion. As Members have already alluded to, evidence shows that that can have a lasting, long-term impact on children's mental, emotional and physical well-being. It can have a detrimental impact on their mental health, child development, risk of harmful sexual behaviour, future cycles of abuse and potential for youth offending. We must also recognise, however, that children can experience the harmful impacts of domestic abuse even if they do not witness it by sight or by sound. Children can be aware and be affected by a parent's distress, fear or pain. Research shows that the impact of domestic abuse is felt throughout a household.

We note that, although this Bill and the provisions for the North in the Westminster Bill are largely similar, there are a few differences, including the inclusion of the generic aggravator provision in this Bill, which is welcomed. It would apply where there is any other offence — for example, criminal damage — that is aggravated by reason of involving domestic abuse and would make an enhanced sentence available to the court.

3.15 pm

Departmental officials have told us that we can expect a range of supplementary provisions to follow this Bill, in the form of a miscellaneous Bill later in the year, but it is important that some of these issues can be addressed in as timely a fashion as possible.

In December 2019, Sinn Féin colleagues in the South introduced legislation to the Dáil that provides for a statutory entitlement to 10 days' domestic violence paid leave. Domestic violence can affect employment, productivity and health and safety. Domestic violence often follows victims into their place of work. In the absence of workplace policies, colleagues and managers are not equipped to support victims and ensure that they are safe. This employment rights provision, therefore,

would give victims the time that they need to seek support, and would also address unpredictable absenteeism and reduced productivity for employers. Victims have a right to a pathway out of abuse without fear of losing their jobs. We as a party are exploring how a similar statutory entitlement could be introduced here in the North.

Additionally, the absence of a legal definition of and effective punishment for stalking has been noted by some stakeholders, including Women's Aid. However, we have been told by the Department to expect specific stalking legislation in the autumn. That is incredibly important because the issues of domestic abuse, coercive control and stalking are all interlinked and our stalking legislation is not fit for purpose. I support the Bill.

Mr Buckley: Again I stand in the House today as someone who speaks on behalf of those in my constituency who are innocent victims of domestic abuse and those who have witnessed it. God willing, it be on record that I speak on behalf of them, and for preventative action to stop that type of action happening in the future.

Being able to talk today on the Bill brings home very starkly to Members the reality of domestic abuse. I want to look at that, because, for many, the term "domestic abuse" can mean many things, but I think that it is important that we spell it out here today. Physical abuse is sometimes the most horrific abuse. Sexual abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse and modern slavery in the home: that is what domestic abuse looks like. Members, it is happening day in, day out in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the period of COVID-19, many of our constituents, and indeed many Members, have come to the immediate realisation that, for many, the family home is a place of refuge, care and attention, where we can be with our loved ones, share company and fellowship, and help one another. We only have to look at pictures that have been going out over social media in relation to the crisis, where we have seen how the strength and the bond of a family unit is essential to get us through what is a very difficult time. However, for those who have suffered domestic abuse, or where there are developing signs in the family home towards domestic abuse, it is true, as has been mentioned today, that they have been caged in their homes, locked away with the very perpetrators of that abuse. I cannot help but think how horrific that must be for anybody, and in particular now, with all the restrictions that are in place, not even being able to leave your house, whether that is for a breath of fresh air or to gather your thoughts.

Those types of issues are real and live today. We know the consequences of domestic abuse but we now need, as has been demonstrated, to strengthen Northern Ireland's domestic abuse laws because, let us face it, it is a damning indictment on this place that we are only getting round to dealing with this issue now. We must address that, and address it head on.

In an earlier debate, Sinn Féin's John O'Dowd said that he made no excuse for being political in the Chamber and that that is what we are elected to do. I take umbrage at that, because this today can be seen as the result of what being political means. Sinn Féin has been political in its approach to COVID-19. That is clear for all to see. Despicably, it is true. In relation to the domestic abuse legislation, one of the very consequences of tearing this place down was that this piece of life-saving legislation

was, shamelessly, left to sit on the shelf while people suffered in their home.

I welcome that today all parties broadly support the type of legislation that is coming forward and that, in particular — I welcome this — the legislation makes coercive control an offence for the first time in Northern Ireland, showing us how out of step we had become with the rest of jurisdictions, which had already legislated on this. It is important that we look at examples of coercive control, because, for many, those words do not mean anything. However, we can look at it as having money taken away or controlled, being isolated from friends and family, having access to food, drinks and day-to-day products restricted, having social media accounts monitored or controlled, being told what you should or should not wear, being threatened with violence if you do not act or behave in a certain way or loved ones or pets being threatened. How many of us today can hear that list and say that we have not seen what is on it in action in our communities? It is all too sad that that is the reality, and, for many, these coercive controls are happening day-to-day and most of society has turned a blind eye. It is important that we put that right here today, and I welcome that the Minister included coercive control in the Bill.

Ms Dillon mentioned this, but I also want to cover the compassionate approach that the legislation takes to cross-examination by perpetrators of these crimes. That is a compassionate approach from the Department because not only can one not imagine the extent of the distress of being in any court being cross-examined by a barrister or someone from the legal profession but the pain caused by being cross-examined by the very person who committed or who is said to have committed said crimes is hard to imagine. I welcome that.

I will bring the Minister's attention to the potential for convictions and sentencing under clauses 13 and 14. I welcome the strengthening of that provision. I believe that, as a society, we must put out strong signals that we will not tolerate this in Northern Ireland. I take cognisance of what my friend Mr Frew said about the need for further examination in the days ahead. There are many elements that will require further scrutiny as the Bill heads towards Committee Stage and to Consideration Stage. Not least of those is the impact that the changes will have on courts and on police officers, which Mr Beattie mentioned, and the scope and cost of the training that is needed and that will be provided. That is important, and any legislation that the House puts in place must not be mere window dressing. It must have substance, it must stand for something and, in fact, it must do what it says on the tin, which is to legislate in a meaningful way to restrict this abuse. We have seen it in the past days, and my friend Mr Givan mentioned that during the period of COVID-19, the police received 2,000 domestic abuse calls in the first three weeks of April. That is scandalous. We can look at the period between July 2018 and June 2019 and see that 16,575 domestic abuse cases were recorded. We know that this is on the rise, whether that is because of COVID-19 or something else, but we must sufficiently equip the PSNI with the appropriate resources to deal with these very issues. I, therefore, look forward to working in a very proactive and constructive way with the Minister and, indeed, with the Committee to bring about a resolution to this legislation and to strengthen it in a way that is befitting to all Members.

A constituent approached me on that very issue not so long ago and talked about the coercive control that they were facing. They talked about how individuals have used the legal aid system to effectively bankrupt and to disrupt their day-to-day life as they have attempted to move on from the horrific abuse that they have suffered. Those are all elements for discussion and there is so much, when it comes to domestic abuse, that must be considered. I trust that the Committee will take on those points. I, as a Member who is not on the Committee for Justice, look forward to playing my part.

In closing, as has been said, there must be more than words. There has to be substance and detail and it must provide results for those who are suffering domestic abuse.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an reachtaíocht seo. I thank the Minister for bringing this important legislation to the Assembly. The essence of the debate is that there will be some repetition, and I apologise for that, but the legislation is vital and cross-party support can be seen for the general provisions of the Bill, particularly on the outlawing of coercive control. We have had many examples of what coercive control means, and there are many more as it is that type of concept.

I also hope that that can be reflected with an attitude of urgency to get the legislation in place. I welcome the comments that the Chairperson of the Committee for Justice made earlier when he indicated that the Committee for Justice will try to bring the Committee Stage forward as soon as possible, albeit with the proper scrutiny that is necessary for the different clauses.

It is unfortunate and very sad to say that domestic abuse and gender-based violence and abuse remain rife in our society. Again, figures given earlier showed that there were 31,000 incidents of domestic abuse in a one-year period in the North. Clearly, more needs to be done before and during this and after, hopefully, we can get the legislation through.

Reporting domestic abuse has increased but it is still an underreported crime. I welcome that the Justice Minister raised the fact that while the vast majority of this abuse is against women, there are other types of abuse, and we have evidence that those are vastly underreported as well.

The Bill is one part of the wider concerted action that is needed. Other steps need to follow. As a society and as an Assembly, as everyone has said so far, we cannot tolerate that abuse in any shape or form. Sinn Féin are fully supportive of the clauses of the Bill, which will outlaw all those forms of abuse that were listed earlier. I will not list them again because they have been stated a number of times.

The Bill comes in the context not only of the previous delay and the urgent need to put in place legislative protections for victims, but of the increasing evidence that the levels of domestic abuse are on the rise globally and here in Ireland, during the COVID-19 crisis. There has been a huge rise in calls and online requests for help to domestic abuse helplines. As some Members said, and I can say myself, we are getting calls into our offices on that basis and they have clearly risen.

Let me make one thing very clear about the context: the present situation does not cause victims of domestic

violence. Abusers do. It is of great concern that many victims of domestic abuse may be suffering more while in lockdown or self-isolation. Women and children, as was said earlier, are more likely to be spending much more time with the perpetrators. Police and other agencies — I should have said at the start that I am also a member of the Policing Board, and I will mention that in a moment — are working with organisations such as Women's Aid and other named organisations to overcome the barriers to victims of domestic abuse seeking and receiving the help that they need.

Local political representatives, the Assembly and the Executive must also play our part. There is a real risk of existing domestic abuse refuges and emergency accommodation being overwhelmed. It is of paramount importance that the Minister of Justice and the Minister for Communities work together to ensure that additional emergency accommodation provision for victims of domestic abuse can be put in place where needed.

To that end, it is crucial that Ministers continue to work together to put in place all necessary protections for victims.

3.30 pm

I welcome the police's focus at a fairly early stage — a very early stage — on tackling the increase in domestic abuse cases during the COVID-19 crisis. At the Policing Board, we were told that they went out rapidly in pursuit of 70 of the most high-risk abusers, and arrested a considerable number of them. The last number that I got was 48. I presume that it has risen since then, and hopefully so. There has been a proactive focus from all quarters towards protecting abuse victims during this difficult time. That has been noted and welcomed by victims' support and advocacy groups, including Women's Aid.

The Bill's provisions will be a bit more complex than those of existing legislation. The outlawing of coercive control is a very positive and welcome move. However, it will require that adequate resources be set aside and training given to PSNI officers who will implement the legislation on the front line. I welcome that other Members have mentioned that we must prepare for that because it may take some time to bring it through. Legislation is only as valuable as how it is utilised. If police officers are not adequately trained to implement the legislation, it will be a pointless exercise. While I am confident that they will be able to implement it, they must be supported in their efforts to do so.

I think that Paul Frew mentioned body-worn cameras. Indeed, before the COVID-19 crisis, there was an issue with the guidelines on the use of body-worn cameras when dealing with domestic violence cases, even though they are issued to every police officer. There was particular emphasis and instruction given that they should be worn in what appear to be cases of domestic violence. While it might not be an incident of domestic violence at the time, I think that the collective view is that the use of a camera would be helpful if there is a further incident.

It has been raised at previous stages, including at Committee for Justice evidence sessions, that implementation of the Bill will take 12 months after it is enacted in order to ensure, as we have been told, that law enforcement officers are trained properly. I will seek assurances that the training can be conducted in as timely

a manner as possible whilst also taking care to ensure that it is of the highest possible standard. We have those balances, but, if we take the point that Paul Givan made earlier, what worries me is the period that it will take to bring that through. If there is no way to collapse that, and it is a year, that will be too long. Training will, then, need to be done. I imagine that it will be a bit later. I know that, as all those things have happened, the Minister has asked about resources. Some of those organisations, who are already experts on this stuff, need an input of resources and cannot wait until the end of that period for the help that is needed. It is more urgent even than the Bill, because we have to prepare for when we get to that point.

During that time, the Policing Board will work with the PSNI to assess whether that can be done more quickly while ensuring that it is done properly. Other members of the Policing Board are here besides me; Dolores and others. I am sure that we will pursue that collectively. We also need to ensure that work to combat domestic violence continues to get the highest priority in the interim and onwards into the future. It is not a new issue here. I am glad that it is under focus and that we have come to the point where we will, hopefully, bring in that legislation.

Ms Armstrong: I support absolutely the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. I thank the Minister for bringing it forward. In recent weeks, we have processed a number of pieces of legislation. The Bill is a piece of legislation that goes beyond COVID-19. While it was already very much needed, as others have said, there has, unfortunately, been an increase in reports to the police of domestic abuse across Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 crisis. That is why the legislation is needed so quickly. People need to know that their abusers will be prosecuted and the conditions that need to be met in order to achieve a successful prosecution.

I sincerely hope that people who are currently in an abusive situation will take heart from the progress of this legislation. I ask that the media take the opportunity to convey to victims that they are not alone and that the House has their back. You do not need to live in pain, in silence or terror. The Minister has heard the calls from her partners — those who work in Women's Aid, the Men's Advisory Project and many more — who work day in, day out with people who have survived abuse. The Minister, the previous Minister and the Department have proposed legislation that is inclusive and will protect victims who reach out for help. I am encouraged that the Minister has acted swiftly since she took on the role of Justice Minister. We needed this to come forward — it has been long enough — and I am very grateful that she has prioritised it.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: I will.

Ms Dillon: One of the things that has not been achieved yet is that the wider community and society accept that this is a community problem. This is not a problem within the home. With all of the work that has been done, that has not yet been achieved.

I was at a meeting where there was around 140 women and two speakers, in the morning session, spoke about violence against women — sexual and domestic violence. When they were asked what the five main problems within their community were for the PSNI, not one single person in that room, other than myself, said domestic

violence. We need to get that message out and we can use this time while we are discussing the Bill to do that. If the Minister could take the lead, we will certainly give her every support. This is a community problem and it has community impact. It is not a problem within an individual's home and, as a community, we need to look out for those people and reach out to them, not wait for them to reach out to us.

Ms Armstrong: I agree and that is why I commend the previous Minister and the Department for the work that they did in having a very comprehensive consultation. Now, going forward, there is an opportunity to take that even further through the Committee.

Working with partners means that the voices of victims can be brought forward. I am not a victim of domestic abuse. I do not know what it feels like to sit at home and be afraid to be at home, where you are scared and worried and — as we all seen in the posters — walking on eggshells for fear that you or your children could be subjected to physical, sexual or mental abuse by someone that you love. Quite often, it is because of shame that people do not want to admit to, or tell others, exactly what is going on behind closed doors. As the Member has said, the community knows that something is going on but, quite often, it is not spoken about.

Many of us have dealt with victims through our constituency offices; I certainly have. I will give a few examples without saying any names, of course. I do quite a lot of food bank vouchers and I have mums who come into the office. They are looking after their grandchildren because their daughter-in-law is not around, for whatever reason, and the son frequently comes into the house and takes all the money to feed his drug habit and leaves the children devastated. There is a bit of physical abuse but there is definitely coercive abuse where all the money is taken out of the house and there is nothing there for the children or the grandmother to eat.

What about the dads? I am sure that we have all come across them, and Mark Durkan spoke earlier about parental alienation. There are dads who come into the office and they are absolutely broken because they have been denied access to the children and the children are being used as a pawn to abuse them. The name-calling and the verbal and physical abuse that he receives any time that he goes to visit, the money that he provides to the house that is never declared, officially, and the pressure that he is put under. He is threatened regularly that if he does not behave and do what he is told that he will not get to see his children. There are times when he is completely denied access to those kids.

I am very glad that this Bill is, very clearly, an inclusive Bill. It talks about couples in an intimate personal relationship or who are personally connected. I am glad to see that, because in a changing society we have to recognise that there are people who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership. There are heterosexual and same-sex couples and family relates to parents, siblings and wider family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, stepchildren and blended families. It is the whole kit and caboodle and the Bill is going to help all of those victims; it does not exclude anyone.

The legislation is, of course, subject to conditions, and I would love victims to understand that. The first condition is

that a reasonable person would consider that the course of behaviour is likely to cause harm. It is about a reasonable person; it is not about saying to a victim, "You must write it down and have all your evidence in black and white". It is about a reasonable person saying, "That is not on. That is not right". Quite often, as Mr Frew said earlier, the abuser has the abused person believing that they are making it up and that the abuse does not exist.

The second condition is that the accused intended to cause harm or was reckless as to whether or not harm would be caused. That means that the person may not have punched the other person in the face, but the threat was enough to make the other person do what they wanted because of the threat of a punch to the face or because all the money was taken out of the house. The children, the mother or the father could be terrified that the children are going to get it next, so they take the abuse themselves, whether it be physical or verbal. The Bill talks about that, but does not define it completely, because, when somebody is being tortured, as I think is mentioned in the explanatory note, whistling a tune could be enough to send the shivers up a victim's back because they know that that means that the other person is not happy and that the victim is going to get it when they get home.

Psychological harm can be even longer-lasting than physical abuse, and I am glad that clause 2 brings that into consideration. Controlling a person in a way that is abusive is so demeaning to that person. We know from cases that come into our constituency offices that there are people living quietly in our community today who have been mentally tortured by their partners, whether that is to completely undermine them or to make them feel so small and so unworthy that they should not even be asking for help. The only reason they are doing it is because they want to make sure that their children have food tonight. That is a disgrace and that is why this Bill is so important.

In conclusion, I look forward to hearing what more the consultation will bring. This is the right way forward. There are those who know better than I do. Women's Aid, the Men's Advisory Project, the church groups and community organisations will know much more and, of course, there are the voices of the victims. If we are to deal with this scourge in our community, we have to have legislation and we have to enable people to take their abuser to court.

The community must understand that domestic abuse is not a funny 1970s joke — "give the wife a slap" — but is horrendous, torturous abuse that is happening day in, day out in our society. I hope that the media lift this today and say that this House does have victims' backs. We do not want anyone in our society to be living in fear, especially not inside their own home.

Miss Woods: I rise today on behalf of the Green Party to finally welcome the introduction of the legislation in Northern Ireland. There has been a tireless campaign for many years for coercive control and controlling behaviour to become a crime, and I pay tribute, as others have done, to a number of groups and individuals that have been involved in getting this legislation to where it is today. The list is in no way exhaustive: Women's Aid; Nexus; the Men's Advisory Project; Victim Support; the Rainbow Project; the Children's Commissioner and those at NICCY; Claire Sugden for her work on this as previous Justice Minister; and, of course, my colleague and party leader

Clare Bailey, as well as every individual advocate who has been out pounding the streets on this.

This Bill is needed for so many reasons but, crucially, for the protection of victims of domestic abuse. PSNI figures show that over 31,000 incidents were recorded in the last financial year, which was 51% higher than the level recorded in 2004-05, when records began. Some Members have stated that abusive incidents in Northern Ireland this year increased by 1.3% on the previous year. Domestic abuse crimes made up nearly 17% of all crimes recorded by police in 2019. That is not good enough and those are only the ones that were recorded. We need to do more about it, but not just from a criminal justice point of view. We also need to look at this through an education lens and a health and social care lens.

3.45 pm

The issue goes right back to how we help people to understand what constitutes a healthy relationship. We must ensure that future generations can avail of a compulsory relationship and sexuality education programme in our schools — let alone addressing the issue of misogyny. If we want to give our children the best start in life, we must also look to the effects of domestic abuse on them and ensure that the home is a safe place for all children and young people, for now and in their future.

Domestic violence has a devastating impact on children and young people that can last into adulthood. A UNICEF report estimated that as many as 275 million children worldwide are exposed to violence in the home and are often the hidden victims of abuse. It is important that the legislation reflects that a child can be aware of domestic abuse in the home, even if they do not see or hear the moment in which it occurs. Children can pick up on a parent's distress or be impacted by a parent's compromised capacity for parenting in the context of fear. Children and young people have the right to be protected from all forms of violence. Adverse childhood experiences, as most Members will be aware, include domestic abuse, which can cause detriment to their physical and emotional health both in the short and long term.

Children affected by domestic abuse need specialist services to help them to deal with trauma and to give them the chance to lead healthy, happy lives. Therefore it is important that support services addressing domestic violence consider the needs of children and the trauma that they have suffered. We must also recognise the effects of abusive relationships from young people to adults, and that child-to-parent violence is recognised in a way that provides support but which does not criminalise vulnerable young people or their families. We must recognise, too, that help and support is required and that that help is there for those who need it.

I look forward to engaging with organisations such as the Samaritans, the NSPCC, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), Bernardo's, and Parenting NI, to name but a few, as part of this process, as their voices must be heard.

The need for this legislation in Northern Ireland is clearer now for many than it has ever been. It has been frequently reported that self-isolation can be dangerous for women or men who are trapped with their abuser, whose behaviour may be aggravated by the chaos and uncertainty

unleashed by the pandemic. The restrictions imposed as part of the strategy to deal with the coronavirus have increased domestic tensions in households, resulting in higher incidences of domestic abuse and extreme violence, including homicide. As we know, isolation is a technique used by perpetrators of abuse, who often seek to exert control by cutting their victims off from the rest of the world in order to increase dependency on the perpetrator and to reduce their options to raise the alarm or to escape.

The PSNI confirmed that they had received an increased number of calls relating to domestic abuse incidents. From 8 to 14 April, they received 721 calls on domestic abuse. That is an additional 136 on the previous week, and whilst these are operational and subject to change, it is just shocking to hear.

Just this morning, it was reported that almost 2,000 calls were made to the PSNI in the first three weeks of this month alone. The charity Refuge reported a 25% increase in the number of calls and online requests made to the national domestic violence helpline, with Nexus reporting a 40% increase in call volumes since the start of April and a doubling of the number of visits to the domestic and sexual abuse website. I know from speaking to the Men's Advisory Project that their call volumes have also increased and that their counsellors have had to increase their hours to accommodate them.

We must do all that we can to protect people from harm, now and in the future. I must use this time, as others have, to appeal to anyone who is experiencing domestic violence, or who is worried about someone who is at risk, to seek help. Please report to the police. Call the helpline for victims of domestic and sexual abuse; reach out to Women's Aid, your GP, your social worker, or a friend.

Men and women have the same rights to protection from domestic abuse and from domestic or sexual violence. It can be difficult for men to acknowledge that they are experiencing abuse, and the shame and stigma attached to this issue can be a huge barrier to accessing support. In 2015-16, 8.4% of men reported having experienced some form of partner violence or abuse since the age of 16. We need to consider that as part of the Bill, of course, as well as resourcing and funding those agencies to help to deal with domestic abuse in Northern Ireland aimed at men. I reiterate that there are support services, and I urge anyone who is experiencing domestic violence to reach out to the Men's Advisory Project, the Men's Advice Line, the Rainbow Project, to name a few, and also the 24-hour helpline for victims of domestic and sexual abuse.

I wish to turn to the specifics of the Bill. It has been closely modelled on the Scottish legislation and is very much focused on non-physical abuse, particularly on what is known as "controlling and coercive behaviour". It contains three aggravators, two of which concern children. The other, more general offences, such as criminal damage, are all welcome.

That would mean that the enhanced sentence was available to the courts and would need to be used. The Bill also contains measures to reduce the potential for the perpetrator to use the criminal justice system to further abuse a victim, which, again, is a positive inclusion. I know of victims of domestic violence who have been dragged through the courts four years after they finally left their ex-partners. In effect, the courtroom and legal proceedings

were being used as another method of abuse. Other Members touched upon that in their contributions.

There are gaps however and, as my colleagues and the Minister have done, I will raise a few points on those. Clause 12 deals with the intention and reasonableness defence. My main concern is around those who are in care or in caring relationships, and those who have disabilities with their physical health and mental health. The concern has also been raised by Eddie Lynch, the Commissioner for Older People, who has noted the phrasing in clause 12(2)(a) that the evidence:

"is enough to raise an issue as to whether the course of behaviour is as described in subsection (1)".

The phrase "enough to raise an issue" seems sufficiently loose as to conceivably allow for victim-blaming as a means of defence. It cannot be the case that the dominant person in a relationship needs only raise a query over the victim's behaviour in order to rationalise abuse, as such formulation may allow.

I support calls for the inclusion of a safeguard in the legislation to protect family members. However, as I raised in Committee, could person A, who is a carer and related to person B, be found to be acting abusively but be excused on the grounds of reasonableness? I do not think that it is specific enough to protect elderly or vulnerable people. We obviously need to make sure that it is, and I look forward to engaging with the Commissioner for Older People on that.

The outworkings of the domestic abuse legislation will necessitate additional training and resources to those involved, such as the PSNI, and the organisations dealing with domestic abuse to be intact, fully resourced and properly trained. The Bill will not completely eradicate domestic abuse, as I have said, but, in order for it to work, the proper resources, funding and training must be provided to all relevant organisations in the community and voluntary sector, statutory agencies, health service, the PSNI and the judiciary. We need a serious commitment to reinvest in refuges and support services for anyone who finds themselves in a position in which they need such support — in the long term and the short term. I hope that the Minister can commit to that. That will require working with other Departments and the pooling of budgets, but it is much needed. We cannot have the continued cuts to the life-saving services that deal with an epidemic of silence and violence on our streets and in our homes. How will resources be allocated in relation to the roll-out of the legislation for all involved? Will Supporting People budgets continue to be cut? Will they stand still? Or, could they potentially increase?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I have raised this question before at the Policing Board. Do you share my concern about how ethnic minorities and people from different cultures will know about this? How are we going to educate people to know that they are victims and that they have a right of redress?

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for her point. I completely agree. A big communication job is needed, by not just the Department but ourselves and the community sector, to get the message out to people about what we are discussing here today and what is going to be coming in.

The questions on resourcing and funding must be answered. We need legislation with teeth, alongside the

properly funded and resourced services that are required to protect people, by the organisations with the correct experience to deal with it.

Westminster's Domestic Abuse Bill contains provisions to establish the office of a commissioner. The commissioner's role is to provide public leadership on domestic abuse issues and play a key role in overseeing and monitoring the provision of domestic abuse services in England and Wales. However, that does not feature in Northern Ireland's Bill. I have concerns about that not being included here. A commissioner would be not only an advocate for the sector but someone who could ensure that adequate levels of funding and training were in place to ensure implementation. The message here will be that introducing a new criminal offence does not completely solve the problem, but we must not take our eye off the ball. We need to make sure that the law works in practice. A commissioner would, therefore, play a key role in supporting the sector, the PSNI and the judiciary in doing that. If there is any question about the cost of such a position, I say this: what is the cost of saving a victim's life?

A glaring absence in the legislation is on stalking, which Mr Frew raised. Stalking covers a wide spectrum of behaviour. Although a majority of stalkers are obsessive ex-partners, others can be brief acquaintances, or even strangers who have become fixated on their victim. The current harassment laws are not up to date, and we desperately need legislation to protect victims. The Minister previously stated that she would be bringing to the House, in the autumn, specific laws to deal with stalking, including stalking protection orders. I hope that that is still on track and ask the Minister for any information that she has on that, given that the consultation responses were published last year.

The proposal for protection notices and orders was also included in an action plan for the 2016 Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland seven-year strategy between the Department of Justice and the Department of Health, but that proposal has not made it into the Bill. So, was it the case that the provisions for the emergency barring orders were not contained in the Scottish Act to date and, therefore, have not been introduced here? I look forward to the discussion on that at the Committee.

Granting secure tenancies for those who are victims of domestic abuse and violence is not specifically addressed in this legislation nor is access to statutory provision for emergency housing, which is needed. Proper cross-departmental working is required to give the support that is needed for victims and their families.

New Zealand has been in the press recently for very, very good reason, but I will take you back to last summer. It was reported that New Zealand had one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the developed world, with police responding to a family violence incident every four minutes. In July 2019, New Zealand passed legislation granting victims of domestic violence 10 days' paid leave to allow them to leave their partners, find new homes and protect themselves and their children. That was down to a private Member's Bill by the Green Party MP Jan Logie through the Domestic Violence Victims' Protection Act. The only other country in the world to have such legislation at a national level is the Philippines, while Canada has legislation in some of its regions. It is no magic bullet but a significant step in the right direction. It goes some way

to recognise the links between the economic situation a victim may find themselves in, and I urge the Minister to engage with the Executive on that. Again, I look forward to discussing that in more detail at Committee Stage.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Ms Dillon: It would be helpful if the Minister could have some conversations with the Minister for Communities around the housing points system because, currently, you can get intimidation points if your intimidation is sectarian or religious or relates to your sexual orientation or disability, but you cannot get intimidation points if you are a victim of domestic violence. In some areas, that has led to the perpetrator being able to get intimidation points because they stated that they were being intimidated because they were an aggressor against their partner or somebody who lives in their household, and the victim cannot get points to be rehoused. So, ten days' leave, very often, is no good to them because they cannot get points to even get emergency accommodation. That needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for her contribution. I completely agree and hope that we will have the opportunity to discuss that during Committee Stage.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I will simply reinforce the points that the Member and Linda have made. One of the reasons why victims do not leave their home is because they contemplate the future being worse or unknown, so better the devil you know. If they could just be persuaded that the future will be better, and that comes with a home, that would go some way to helping victims to take that first step of raising the issue of domestic violence with the police, knowing that the journey that they are on will lead them to a better place, to a home and comfort and protection. That is why it is very important to link this up with the future and with housing points. You are quite right: people abuse the intimidation points system at the minute because they get their mate Jimmy Hard-knuckles to ring something through and vice versa, and two toerags end up getting homes when they do not need them. Who needs a house more than a victim of domestic violence who needs to leave their home and needs to be persuaded to leave their home.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his contribution. It brings back the importance of this being a whole community response and the importance of a wraparound service for someone who has found themselves to be a victim through no fault of their own. We need all those provisions there so that when they are able to take that step to say, "This has been going on. I need help", everybody can jump on board, whether it is housing, counselling, provision for children or something to do with school, whatever is needed, that we have all those powers at our disposal. The work of the community and voluntary sector so far in providing support for women and children especially has been absolutely fantastic through the refuges. Hats off to anybody who is doing that work.

4.00 pm

I am going to finish by referring to an online blog by a lady called Karen Smith. It is called, 'Counting Dead Women'. Some Members may have heard of it and, for those who have not, I suggest that you give it a like or a follow on Twitter. She recently wrote that in the first three weeks of

lockdown, 14 women and two children were killed in the United Kingdom in a domestic setting. This is double the normal rate, if there was actually something that could be called a “normal rate”.

Bearing this in mind, I want to read an extract from a post written by her in the middle of April about the effects of lockdown and abuse on women. She said:

“What we’re seeing is a window into the levels of abuse that women live with all the time. Coronavirus may exacerbate triggers, though I might prefer to call them excuses, lockdown may restrict some women’s access to support or escape and it may even curtail measures some men take to keep their own violence under control. But coronavirus doesn’t make a killer out of a man who has never been controlling, abusive and/or violent to the woman he is in a relationship with. And we must surely extend our concerns to the women and children who will live through the coronavirus lockdown with an abuser and survive.”

There are issues to overcome with this Bill in the near future, and I look forward to doing that in Committee and hearing from the sector through much-needed evidence sessions. However, it is crucial that we get it right.

Mr Allister: The House will get no quibble from me about the need to address the pernicious and insidious issue of domestic abuse. However, the critical test of how we are addressing it comes in an inspection of the offence that the legislation will create, and there the House will get quibble from me about whether or not this offence, as drafted in the Bill, is efficiently sufficient to address this issue. In summary, I believe that, as drafted and running over five clauses, this offence is more convoluted than it needs to be.

I recognise that it is really a cut-and-paste from the Scottish legislation, but that is not a good enough answer in respect of why it is in the form it is in. If we take the time to look at the component parts of the offence, in clause 1 we discover, not surprisingly, that there has to be:

“a course of behaviour that is abusive of another person”,

and that:

“the course of behaviour to be likely to cause B to suffer physical or psychological harm”.

That is exactly what you would expect, and that either the person:

“intends ... physical or psychological harm, or

(ii) is reckless as to whether”,

that harm occurs, or not.

Let us move to clause 2. The Minister said that there was no definition of abusive behaviour, however clause 2 is in fact the definition. The title of it is, “What amounts to abusive behaviour” — in other words, what defines. So, this is the definition. The behaviour referred to has to be either “violent” — fair enough, that is good — or “threatening” — good — or behaviour directed at the victim that:

“has as its purpose ... one or more of the relevant effects” —

— here we are heading down the road of convolution —

“ or

(ii) would be considered by a reasonable person to be likely to have one or more of the relevant effects”.

Remember, clause 1 required the perpetrator to either “intend” or to be “reckless” to causing the abuse. Now we are introducing a new dimension that, rather than having the purpose of one of the relevant effects, it is enough if it:

“would be considered by a reasonable person to be likely to have one or more of the relevant effects.”

The relevant effects are listed: making the victim “dependent on, or subordinate to” the perpetrator, whatever that means; isolating the victim:

“from friends, family, other sources of social interaction or support”

and

“controlling regulating or monitoring”

the victim’s day-to-day activities; depriving the victim, or restricting the victim’s freedom of action; making the victim:

“feel frightened, humiliated, degraded, punished or intimidated.”

You have to show that the purpose is one of those relevant effects, or that a reasonable person would think that the effect is likely to be one of those.

We come to the most remarkable clause in the Bill. Clause 3 is astounding, I believe. It says:

“The domestic abuse offence can be committed whether or not”

the perpetrator’s behaviour actually causes the victim to suffer harm or psychological harm.

Think about that. A criminal offence, for which you can get 14 years in prison, can be committed whether or not the person against whom it is said to be committed actually suffers the physical or psychological harm that is the telltale sign of the abuse.

It goes on to say that the perpetrator’s behaviour “can be abusive” of the victim, whether or not their:

“behaviour actually has one or more of the relevant effects”,

set out in clause 2. So, whether or not you cause physical or psychological harm, or whether or not you cause one of the relevant effects — the subordination, the isolating, the controlling, the depriving, making them feel frightened or humiliated — whether you achieve any of those, the perpetrator can be guilty of the offence nonetheless.

Let us take the first one:

“The domestic abuse offence can be committed whether or not A’s behaviour actually causes B to suffer harm of the sort referred to in section 1(2).”

The sort referred to in section 1(2) is “physical or psychological”. When it says that the domestic abuse offence can be committed “whether or not” behaviour actually causes, that is saying, whether or not objectively it actually causes. It is not saying, as I heard one Member infer, whether or not the victim thinks they have not

suffered that. It does not say that the domestic abuse offence can be committed whether or not the victim acknowledges, accepts, or admits, that it has caused any of those effects. What it actually says is:

“The domestic abuse offence can be committed whether or not A’s behaviour actually causes B either physical or psychological harm, or to suffer”

one of the relevant effects.

That is an objective assessment. Did the victim suffer harm? If the answer to that is no, did the victim suffer any of the relevant effects, such as being deprived of freedom of action, being controlled or being dependent on? If the answer to that is no, then, nonetheless, you can have the commission of an offence.

I ask the question, where is the actus reus of this event? In criminal law, there are two components to an offence: the mens rea, the intention to do it or recklessness, and the actus reus, the actual doing of it. If clause 3 begins by telling you they have not actually succeeded in doing anything, how can there be an offence? Yet that is what this legislation says. So it is a crime with no victim, in a sense. It is not that the victim says they have not suffered; the law says, objectively, you find there has been no harm.

It is enough to get to that point if some reasonable person thinks that it could have had — even though it did not — that effect. If a reasonable person thinks that it could have had that effect, even though they are wrong, and it did not, it still is an offence. That is absurd.

It is clause 3, in my respectful opinion, that makes this offence something which will be very difficult, in many circumstances, to bring home in a prosecution. That is why I said that this offence is far too convoluted. It is a convoluted muddle.

Let me contrast that with what is happening today in Westminster. At this very time, coincidentally, Westminster is discussing its domestic abuse Bill. I want to remind you of all the convolutions I took you through about how you create our offence. Compare it now to the definition in clause 1 of the domestic abuse Bill:

“Behaviour is “abusive” if it consists of any of the following—

- (a) physical or sexual abuse;*
- (b) violent or threatening behaviour;*
- (c) controlling or coercive behaviour;*
- (d) economic abuse ...;*
- (e) psychological, emotional or other abuse;”*

That is it. That is clear, it is unambiguous, largely, and it is intelligible. Compare that with clauses 1, 2, 3 and 4 — particularly 1, 2 and 3 — of our legislation. That is why I said it is a muddle.

I say to the Justice Committee, when you come to look at this legislation, set down in front of you the definition of domestic abuse in the Westminster Bill and set down the multiple clauses in this Bill, which define it in this jurisdiction, and ask yourself this question, “Which is the better of the two?”. Ask it in this context, and I say this somewhat from my professional experience: any criminal offence is most effective the simpler it is. The more convolutions you build into a criminal offence, the more refuge there is to avoid conviction. That is exactly

the flaw of the Scottish Act and this Bill. It, in effect, builds an offence, which far from being crisp, intelligible, straightforward, and with very few escape routes, creates one of the various opposite description. That is why I think that these clauses, this definition of the offence, is not going to deliver the clear-cut conviction rate that we need for domestic abuse.

Let me just take a little further this idea of the reasonable man deciding that is enough if a reasonable person thinks it is likely to cause one of the impacts. Go, then, to clause 12 and you will see, “Defence on grounds of reasonableness”.

Let us imagine that we have got to the situation in a trial where, because of clause 3, you have got past the direction stage, where a judge in any criminal case — at the halfway point, as it were; at the end of the prosecution case — has to consider whether there is enough evidence to go to the jury and the defence can apply for a direction that there is not. Let us say that you have got past that stage on the basis of one of the particular circumstances here: because a reasonable person thinks that the abuse outlined was likely to have one of the likely effects, even though it had none of those effects, and the judge holds that there is enough on that basis to get to this point. Then, you read clause 12, which says:

“(1) In proceedings in respect of a charge against a person (“A”) of the domestic abuse offence, it is a defence for A to show that the course of behaviour was reasonable in the particular circumstances.

(2) That is shown if—

(a) evidence adduced is enough to raise an issue as to whether the course of behaviour is as described in subsection (1), and

(b) the prosecution does not prove beyond reasonable doubt that the course of behaviour is not as described in subsection (1).”

Does that mean that the reasonable man might think that there is enough for the prosecution to continue but some other mythical reasonable man is meant to think that what was said and done was reasonable? That is the impossible conundrum of clause 12 because of clause 3 and what goes before it about the reasonable man.

4.15 pm

If you want to be effective and create a viable offence, cut out all the chaff. Get to the heart of the matter, as the Westminster Bill does, and specify precisely what domestic abuse is. Do not muddle it with what the reasonable man might or might not think. Do not muddle it to the point where, even though there is no complaint of abuse and no objective finding of harm, this reasonable man can nonetheless send you to jail for 14 years. How could that be? Yet, that is how those clauses are constructed. Simplify them, make them forthright and clear and take away the hiding holes. I spent a career in the criminal courts, and legislation that had hiding holes was a gift to defence lawyers. This will be a gift to defence lawyers.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. He has been making a lot of points that, I have no doubt, the Committee will want to consider. Rightly, he has made

them at this stage, and I thank him for that. He is right that legislation needs to be effective and have teeth that deliver the prosecution. One such example of that not happening was when the Assembly passed legislation on sectarianism in sport and sporting fixtures but did not define what that sectarianism was. It was symbolic legislation that has not resulted in any prosecution. Whilst the spirit of what is in the Bill at this Second Reading is meritorious, it requires scrutiny to make sure that it does what we want it to do. In that regard, the Member has been making a useful contribution.

Mr Allister: I trust that it has not fallen on deaf ears, but we will see. I think that I have made that point.

Let me go to clause 26 and a less major point but one that needs to be made. This is the circumstance where personal cross-examination is prohibited. That is fair enough. The person themselves is not allowed to cross-examine. They do not nominate a lawyer to do it for them, and you arrive at the situation where the court makes the judgement that a lawyer should cross-examine for them. We find that, under article 11G, which is being interposed into the other legislation:

“The court must consider whether it is necessary in the interests of justice for the witness to be cross-examined by a qualified legal representative appointed by the court ...

(6) If the court decides that it is, the court must appoint a qualified legal representative ... to cross-examine the witness ...

(7) A qualified legal representative appointed by the court under paragraph (6) is not responsible to the party” —

that is, the accused, let us say —

“except in so far” —

I am sorry: these are family proceedings, so it could be the respondent or the applicant —

“except in so far as acting in the interests of the party by virtue of this Article.”

I would like to hear from the Minister what

“is not responsible to the party”

means. The way in which cross-examination works is that you take your instructions through your solicitor from your client. They tell you, “This is what my case is. This is the case I want to put”. You are then responsible for the putting of that case. In that, there is client/solicitor privilege. How do you get your instructions if you are not responsible? How do you handle those instructions in terms of solicitor/client privilege if you are not responsible? Why would you not be responsible to the person on whose behalf you act? If you are not responsible to him, who are you responsible to? In whose interests are you acting? There is no point in saying to a man or a woman, “We will give you legal representation, but the person who represents you will have no loyalty or duty to you”. Whom they have it to I do not know. I would like to hear from the Minister what it means when it says that the representative that is appointed is “not responsible to the party”. What on earth is that meant to mean? I will leave it there.

Ms Sugden: First, I pay tribute to victims of domestic abuse. I offer my sincere condolences to the families and friends of loved ones whose lives have been taken by someone whom, they thought, they could trust and whom they loved. One is too many, but it happens too often. My thoughts are also with those suffering domestic abuse, and I hope that our work today gives them strength to seek help and support.

In May 2016, in Stormont Castle, the First Minister and the late deputy First Minister designates asked me what I wanted to accept the role of Minister of Justice. I did not have red lines, famously, but I simply said that I wanted to tackle domestic abuse. At that point, tackling domestic abuse became my overarching priority as Minister, as an MLA and as a human being.

It is my biggest regret that I could not present this legislation to the House — not because of my ego, I assure you, but because nearly three years have passed since I was due to present the Bill. In those three awful years, women and men have died because of domestic abuse. On average, the police have received around 30,000 reports of domestic abuse incidents across Northern Ireland every year. There were nearly 100,000 if not more reported incidents while the Assembly played politics outside. The number of incidents that have not been reported really does not bear thinking about. How many incidents of sustained, psychological torment have victims endured, when they maybe did not even realise that they were being abused, because we did not legislate three years ago? This is a great day for this legislation for victims. It is not my intention to pour cold water on what we are now achieving, but, for the sake of lost lives and for the sake of victims who continue to suffer domestic abuse, I must point out our failure to them. It is shameful. I can speak only for myself, but I am deeply sorry to victims and their families who have experienced or continue to experience domestic abuse. Sadly, the House allowed domestic abuse to thrive by doing nothing, and that should never happen again.

It was my priority, and I am really pleased that it is Minister Long’s priority. This is the important law that we will pass in this mandate. Domestic abuse did not become an issue when I took office. It has long been the hidden shame of our society. To be honest, it is not really hidden. We all know about it. I have no doubt that, if I asked you to think about a person — not a constituent — who, you know or you suspect, is suffering from domestic abuse, you could. Crudely, some continue to even joke about domestic abuse or to dismiss continued insults, a black eye, broken bones, death: “It is just a domestic. It went a wee bit too far this time”. Many still blame the victim or prioritise the issues that led the perpetrator to abuse: “He had mental health issues. He’s been through a lot. She drove him to it”. No. She was murdered. He did it, and that is wrong. I have no doubt that there are reasons, circumstances and environments that lead people to commit crimes. I will discuss that, but our focus, in the first instance, should be on victims and the life that has been lost and damaged by domestic abuse. Historically, for the first time, this legislation does that.

Domestic abuse does not discriminate: women, men, teenagers, the elderly, black, white, gay, straight, disabled, politicians, doctors, farmers, the unemployed are victims. Women, men, teenagers, the elderly, black, white, gay,

straight, disabled, politicians, doctors, farmers, the unemployed are perpetrators. It is universal, and maybe that is why we have accepted it for so long. I did not; Minister Long has not; and the House should not. I do not expect Members to reject the Bill. When we took the idea of the legislation to the Committee in autumn 2016, it was supported unanimously. The current Committee supports the legislation. That is a clear message of our intent, a message to victims that we are finally listening, a message that domestic abuse in all forms is a crime and will not be tolerated in society.

At this point, I pay tribute to activists, including the Women's Aid Federation NI, Victim Support, Men's Advisory Project, Rape Crisis NI, Action on Elder Abuse, Nexus and many others who have long pursued the need to recognise domestic abuse as an offence. They taught me much and guided my opinion. They continue to work in our communities to improve the lives of those suffering domestic abuse. Mrs Cameron raised an important point about the need to provide funding for the community and voluntary sector, particularly if we are seeing an increase of cases during the COVID-19 crisis. It is really great that, finally, we have the legislation, but it is those groups, as well as the criminal justice partners, that will ensure its implementation. We need to resource them to do so.

The Minister made comments about a domestic abuse commissioner in Northern Ireland and was keen to consider ideas around that. I advocate a domestic abuse commissioner. I appreciate the Minister's concern. However, given the nature of the offence, in that it is behavioural, it will be difficult to implement. Most crimes are a one-off event. They happen, it is clear what constitutes that offence and a process follows to prove and convict. Behavioural offences are more difficult. It is usually more than two occurrences, and then you add the word "reasonable", which gives rise to its own interpretation.

Will the public fully understand? Will the investigating officer feel equipped to gather the evidence that could lead to a case being presented to the PPS, and then a court case and a possible conviction? In my experience as a constituency MLA, there are regular difficulties in relation to investigating harassment, for example, because it is a behavioural offence.

4.30 pm

Mr Allister asked me earlier today whether I was happy with this legislation. Of course I am; I am delighted. To be fair, however, he did remind me of the difficulty in implementing such legislation in other regions of the UK. At the time, I thought that I knew what he was talking about, but then I listened to his contribution and now I am not sure. I think that what he has done is to raise the point that this legislation needs to be fit for purpose. It is one thing being symbolic, and from the outset I think that that is all that we could have hoped for, but we are at a stage now where it has to be much more than that. It needs to be able to be implemented.

It is modelled on Scotland. Mr Allister, you are the first person I have heard criticise the Scottish model, and I am interested in that, because it seems to be lauded as the model that we should have followed. It is good that we have the opportunity to tailor it to the specific needs of Northern Ireland, and I commend the Minister for

taking it forward here, rather than at Westminster. I fully support her in doing so. Where we are now, we do have the benefit of drawing on the strengths and weaknesses of other jurisdictions. We need to consider Mr Allister's contribution. We need to stop domestic abuse and save lives by making sure that this is right and that it is fit for purpose. I understand the necessity, particularly after three years, of getting this onto the statute book, but it must be right. Any law is only as good as its implementation. If we cannot do that, all of this will have been in vain.

I still think that there will be issues with understanding this offence. I am not necessarily criticising the law, although I am beginning to rethink it. We need to be very mindful of its successful implementation. I ask the Minister: is there any such thing as putting in a communications clause around this Bill? I think the biggest piece will be to educate people about what this is. I have no doubt that there are people who behave in a particular way and would not even consider that, under this law, they might be committing an offence. If we are to implement this and do what we intend in protecting future victims and the victims that exist, we need to ensure that people understand what this law is.

I maintain that, in Government, we need a strategic approach to governance. Outcomes-based accountability needs to find its place again. I find it disappointing that the Government do not seem to use that phrase too often. I will take it for granted for now that the intent is there and that we will see more of it when we emerge from this crisis. I agree with Ms Dillon that to truly tackle societal issues, including domestic abuse, we need a joined-up approach. We need to address social deprivation and access to high-quality education for all. We need sex education. What is a healthy relationship? My time as Justice Minister taught me that kids of all backgrounds and all ages do not understand what that is, and that is going to lead to many problems down the line, including domestic abuse and sexual violence.

Children and young people need opportunities to aspire to a better life, and we badly need to address mental health and trauma. We are a post-conflict society, but you would not know it from the services that we offer. A generation is traumatised. Intergenerational trauma means that the pain of our past will continue unless we address it. The consequences, which include domestic abuse, will continue unless we address it. I have said many times before in the Chamber that I do not believe that anyone is born bad. I think that they are a product of their circumstances, and that includes domestic abuse. It is not an excuse. It is a reason that we need to address, because the best thing that we can do for victims is to not create them.

I want to come back slightly to the issue of trauma, because I feel strongly about addressing it. To that end, I hope to develop a private Member's Bill that ensures that all future policy development in Northern Ireland takes a trauma-informed approach, similar to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 or the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

I am talking about trauma because domestic abuse is a trauma. When I was Minister, I was keen to address domestic abuse because of the scourge that it is, but I also recognised that addressing domestic abuse breaks the cycle. Trauma perpetuates the cycle.

I will give you an example. It is a very simple anecdote that I used to use to describe trauma when chatting with people. If a child sees his father hitting his mother in the home, that child will be traumatised. That trauma may manifest as a mental health or addiction issue, which in itself may lead that young adult or adult to commit domestic violence of his own or to have some other issue in his adult life. If that is the case, we are perpetuating a cycle that will never end. We need to break that cycle. Mr Frew referred to that as well.

I will speak briefly about elements of the Bill. Part 1, which we focused on a lot during our time in office, contains the domestic abuse offence that specifically defines coercive control as such. Ms Armstrong noted that earlier. The PSNI had a great campaign called "Walking on Eggshells", which gave a good pictorial representation of what it feels like to be under coercive control. I recognise the fact that we need to create legislation that captures that and that can enable convictions. However, that is the piece of work that needs to be done when we are trying to communicate to the public what coercive control is about. We need to describe to them what it is. I reiterate the point that many people will not recognise either their own behaviour or what is happening to them as being a form of coercive control or that we are legislating for something that may end up leading to a conviction for their loved one.

The offence of aggravation of a child is really important. I probably say that because of the point that I made about trauma and the impact that it will have on a child. It sends a clear message that domestic abuse, particularly in a familial setting, is very serious and has a wider societal impact than just what it is doing to that family unit. We do not exist in isolation in most cases. We are usually part of a family unit, so it is important that a lot of the legislation that we take forward in the House recognise the family element in all of this.

The new Part of the Bill, which I am not familiar with, concerns family proceedings. I ask the Minister whether that is included to address somewhat the concerns around parental alienation. Prior to restoration, I met Department of Justice officials to discuss parental alienation, and we felt that it could be specified in the Bill. It was felt at the time that the legislation covered parental alienation and could be interpreted in such a way but that perhaps a way in which to strengthen the legislation, particularly for the criminal justice agencies, would be to add it to the guidance so that, whenever the agencies are reading and interpreting the legislation for a criminal justice process, it would specifically mention parental alienation.

Tackling domestic abuse is an issue that I am very passionate about. It baffles me that we have not addressed it up until now. We have not resourced the issue up until now. The fact that there are 30,000-plus incidents of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland every year, and that figure includes only those that we find are being reported, demonstrates that we need to tackle the issue. If those were figures from any other project, it would be obvious into where we needed to put our resources. I appreciate the Minister taking forward the Bill. It is, sadly, three years too late for many people, but, moving forward, it is the right thing to do. I will support the legislation.

Mrs Long: I will say first that progressing this legislation is a priority for me in this mandate. It is hugely important that we make good progress with it. I therefore thank all

Members for their constructive and positive engagement today on the issue of domestic abuse, because it is important not only to me and the Department but to all of us in the House who represent constituents who have often been through such experiences. As the Bill moves through its legislative stages in the Assembly, I hope that we can continue in the same spirit to ensure that this important legislation reaches the statute book as soon as possible and starts delivering for those people across Northern Ireland who are being abused in their own home.

Victims and survivors bravely shared their personal accounts with me, explaining how their lives were broken by psychological and emotional abuse. They are the driving force behind the Bill, and they are my motivation. Many of you will feel the same as you have engaged with countless constituents who were experiencing systematic psychological and emotional abuse at the hands of someone whom they ought to have been able to trust. Now is our chance to help those affected.

The overarching purpose of the Bill is to criminalise patterns of psychological and emotional abuse of an intimate partner, former partner or close family member. There was general consensus throughout the debate that this is the right thing to do. I am heartened by this, but not surprised. It is hard to see how anyone could consider that this type of behaviour did not warrant criminalisation. The new offence is needed to close the gap in the law and ensure that protection is not limited to physically violent behaviour, as it is at present. It will provide the police with the opportunity to intervene early and, potentially, stop the escalation of domestic abuse. Police currently attend incidents where that coercive and controlling behaviour is present, but their options are limited because, as things stand, that behaviour on its own is not an offence. We know that psychological or emotional abuse is repetitive and that the aggregate effect causes the build-up of constant anxiety and fear. The offence reflects this. The behaviour is often tailored to cause the victim maximum harm. The offence is purposely broad to capture such nuanced behaviours. It could also capture physical violence, sexual violence and threatening behaviour, if that is present.

Members recognised, quite rightly, that the Bill contains more than just a new offence. It also includes safeguards to prevent an abuser using criminal justice processes to further exert control and influence over their victim. Those provisions should help to minimise the victim's trauma while ensuring that the proper administration of justice is achieved. The two child aggravators associated with the offence are included in the Bill in recognition of the damage that domestic abuse does to children. The statutory general aggravator also means that domestic abuse can be recognised alongside any other offence.

I consider that the maximum penalty, which I set out earlier, reflects the very serious and long-lasting impact that domestic abuse can have on victims. Clearly, however, the maximum penalty will not be given in every single case. The family justice provisions will mean that perpetrators are also prevented from using the family justice system to continue the abuse of their victim. They will also ensure that victims giving evidence at family proceedings have the same protection as victims who give evidence in criminal proceedings from being cross-examined by their abuser in person.

I turn now to some of the issues raised by Members during the debate. First, I will reflect on the remarks of Paul Givan, who is the Committee Chair. He recognised the depth of harm and the multi-generational damage that can lie behind each of the statistics that we talk about today. I recognise how important the Committee's cooperation will be in moving this offence from the debate here in the Chamber to becoming a reality in statute. I am committed to working with Paul, Linda and the Committee to assist them as they scrutinise the Bill.

I want to address a number of the queries that Paul raised today, though, come Committee Stage, there will be a lot of time to do so in more detail. First, clause 12 provides for a defence of reasonableness, if, for example, someone restricts another person's access to household finances because that person suffers from an addiction or illness or on safety grounds. Proof of the reasonableness of that action will need to be provided. It is not a "get out of jail free" card.

Clause 13 sets out the alternative offences provision. There are cases where the offence may have been committed and the evidence is such that that can be proven, but a personal connection cannot be proven. In those cases, the alternative offences of harassment and putting people in fear of violence under articles 4(1) and 6(1) of the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 can be used. Stalking will be added to that list in due course. People can be charged with both offences at the outset or it can be a fallback position. That is a matter for the PPS to make a judgement on at the time.

On using the court process to victimise, the Bill contains important provisions that balance the right of individuals to access the justice system, including the right to defend themselves.

It is important that we protect that, whilst addressing the issue of someone abusing the system to further intimidate their victim.

4.45 pm

The Chair mentioned the Attorney General and his query about extraterritorial jurisdiction. The Attorney General was, in general, supportive of the Bill. He expressed informally one reservation with respect to competence: whether the criminalisation of behaviour occurring outside the UK forms part of the law of a country other than Northern Ireland. Both the Office of the Legislative Counsel and the Departmental Solicitor's Office are of the view that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Assembly. This does not prevent the Bill progressing or being enacted. Discussions on the Attorney General's reservation are ongoing, and I am confident that that query can be resolved.

I want to thank the Chair for his commitment that the Committee will work with the sector to expedite consideration and scrutiny. It is hugely important that that scrutiny takes place — that is why I opted to bring the Bill through the Assembly rather than simply piggyback on Westminster legislation — but it is also important that a balance is struck given all that people have said about the urgency of getting this Bill through. The need for scrutiny must be balanced against the need to get an offence in statute so that we can start to move on and see prosecutions flow from this legislation.

With respect to COVID-19, Linda Dillon asked if we could ensure that seeking help or fleeing domestic violence or abuse is regarded as an essential journey. We have taken account of that. Those who provide counselling and support for victims of domestic abuse, domestic violence and sexual violence were also designated as essential workers. So, we recognised at the outset of the lockdown that there would be the need for people either to flee abuse or assist others who are suffering from abuse, and that was taken account of in the regulations.

I agree that cross-departmental working is vital. Better sex and relationship education, better mental health support, better access to safe accommodation and many other elements need to be taken forward if we are to see a rounded response to domestic abuse. I have been working with other Executive colleagues. For example, it is the Department of Health that generally provides organisations with the core funding to actually support domestic abuse victims, but we work together in the operation of that. I hope that, through the seven-year strategy that the Executive already have in place, we will continue to be able to do that. It is worth noting that, in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, Minister Hargey and I met to discuss temporary accommodation for those who are suffering from domestic violence. We want not just a piecemeal approach for this particular crisis situation but to look at the longer-term issues, and I will come on to that later.

Sentencing will obviously be a matter for the judiciary, but I want to clarify one thing. I said that the longest sentences are likely to be for either lengthy periods of psychological abuse or where violence has also occurred. I want to put on record that that is not to say that violence must occur for the longest sentence to be triggered.

Ms Dillon also raised the issue of domestic homicide. Devastatingly, particularly for the families involved, there have already been four domestic homicides since the COVID-19 lockdown began. Across the Executive and with our partners, we have been working on a multi-agency basis to ensure a joined-up response for those who are vulnerable and require specific protections at this time. That multi-agency group is working to ensure connectivity on addressing those concerns. On the domestic homicide reviews, a selection process is under way to select three independent chairs. The COVID-19 outbreak has made it impossible for us to complete the selection process at this point, and a small number of candidates remain to be interviewed. We are looking to compete that process via video technology. Preparations for the introduction of homicide reviews are at a very advanced stage. Once the chairs have been selected, training will commence. The model will be refined using historical cases. Guidance and a tender for classroom-based training have been prepared and will be circulated when businesses are able to open and fully function again. I hope that domestic homicide reviews will be introduced around the end of the year, with a review of the process in one to two years' time.

Finally, Linda Dillon raised the issue of non-molestation orders and the use of them to abuse and maintain unwanted contact with victims. While a non-molestation order is granted in a civil court and is a civil order, a breach of it is a criminal offence, and breach of the order may be subject to a fine of £5,000 or to a term of six months' imprisonment or both. Any change resulting

in any strengthening of those provisions would be something that the Finance Minister would have to take forward. Unfortunately, the landscape around family law is quite complex, with the Department of Health and the Department of Finance leading on policy and the Department of Justice leading on legislation, so I think that it would require a review first and foremost in the Department of Finance.

With respect, however, to family proceedings, one of the concerns is about the cost. I think that it is something that we need to address, because I think that there can be a misunderstanding. The making and enforcement of non-molestation orders is an important mechanism by which people can be shielded from dangerous abuse. Assistance is available from a legal aid fund for anyone who needs to apply for a non-molestation order. The Legal Services Agency waives the applicable means test in respect of those applications, however victims may have to pay for legal representation, and I think that that is often where we see people incurring significant costs as they hire legal representation to defend their case if they are not able to represent themselves and do not want to do so.

I think that it was Linda Dillon who raised the issue of domestic abuse policies and particularly Operation Encompass. The Department, in conjunction with colleagues in Education, Health and police, is considering how notification could be made to schools of domestic abuse incidents and what legislative change would be needed. It could ensure that teachers are aware of incidents that may impact on a pupil in advance. Work in the area is likely to be piloted first, and the discussions on that pilot are ongoing. Given this, I think that any legislative changes should be made following the pilot and through a future legislative vehicle, potentially the miscellaneous provisions Bill, if a pilot can be established in that time frame, rather than holding up this particular Bill.

Both Paul Givan and Linda Dillon raised the issue of whether the offence was too broad and, therefore, ineffective. There are a number of specific conditions attached to the Bill. There must be abusive behaviour on two or more occasions. A reasonable person would have to consider that it would cause harm. A person must intend to cause harm or be reckless as to that. Our approach is to ensure that the provisions are operationally effective. For this reason, there has been and continues to be close engagement with our statutory and voluntary sector partners to ensure that we capture the full breadth of domestic abuse offences.

Dolores Kelly asked whether I could give any reassurance on funding in the Budget. I think that, if I were to do so, the Finance Minister would arrive in the Chamber to tell me that I am above my pay grade, so I will not do that. However, I want to provide some reassurance, because I know that Pam Cameron also raised the issue, particularly the voluntary sector in the current crisis. Funding and family policy are led by Health and Finance, but we do commission some services. For example, we have extended our advertising around domestic abuse, and we are aware that that has led to increased use of the helplines. We have also been promoting within the Police Service the silent solution for those who are at imminent risk of danger. People who cannot speak on the phone because their abuser is present can dial 999 and then

press 55, and people will know that they are in immediate danger and respond as a matter of urgency.

On the additional funds, in many of the cases, the new offence will already be being supported by our voluntary sector partners. These may not be offences, but they do impact on people's lives, so people are already suffering from this abuse. It is not a new abuse; it is simply a new offence. The offence will build on cases that could otherwise be in the system, involving physical abuse or violence, and we will monitor the number of new victims coming forward when the offence is in place. We think that we could see an increase overall in offences of around 3%, and we will want to monitor the impact of that on a range of organisations, including statutory and non-statutory partners.

Mrs Kelly also raised the current status of domestic abuse protection orders and domestic abuse protection notices. To be clear, a number of Members have conflated domestic violence protection notices orders with domestic abuse orders and notices. Just to be clear, domestic violence protection orders and notices already have primary legislation in place. They provide victims with immediate protection for up to 28 days following an incident of domestic violence and give them time to consider what they want to do next. The formal introduction of domestic violence protection notices and orders requires Assembly approval in relation to legal aid and also court rule changes. My officials are liaising with the police and court colleagues on a number of outstanding issues in that regard. Subject to the resolution of those, I hope that they can be introduced in the second half of 2020, subject to the necessary legislation passing through the Assembly and the training for police officers being programmed and delivered.

With respect to the domestic abuse protection notices and orders, which I think Mrs Kelly referred to and are in the Bill in Westminster, that will involve quite considerable policy development — probably six to nine months — ahead of drafting legislation. I know that some Members said that an amendment is a quick and simple thing to do. That is true if it is just words on a page, but if you are going to develop the policy, the training and the whole toolkit that is required to implement it effectively, it will take six to nine months. Given, particularly, the high praise that you had for the team in the Department of Justice, if they believe that it could take six to nine months ahead of drafting, I think that it would be wise for Members to take that advice seriously when it comes to whether they want to proceed ahead of that.

Importantly, the new notices and orders are intended for domestic abuse cases, to replace and build on current protections, such as non-molestation orders, occupation orders and restraining orders. In the absence of the new notices and orders, the other protections are therefore still available. As I said during my opening remarks, there would be merit in operating the orders and notices in England and Wales on a pilot basis to see how effective they are and to take any learning from that as we draft our own response.

Mrs Kelly also referred to an offenders' register and issues of disclosure. What is being proposed are notification requirements to inform the police, rather than a register that individuals could search. I have not taken a final decision on that issue, but we must remember that notification requirements are there to protect people from an individual who poses a public risk to others, regardless

of whether they are in a relationship with them, for wider public safety. While a domestic abuse offender can pose a significant risk in the context of a relationship, it is often not to the wider public. Furthermore, notification requirements are similar to those already in place for people who are subject to a violent offender prevention order, and this is a specific provision for domestic violence offences, helping to capture habitual perpetrators.

Importantly, our domestic violence and abuse disclosure scheme already enables an individual to ask the police whether their partner, or the partner of someone that they are concerned about, poses a risk. In addition, under this, the police can proactively advise an individual that their partner poses a risk, as has occurred in a number of cases. That disclosure scheme, as you know, was introduced in March 2018. Since its introduction, it has dealt with 614 applications under the right to ask and the power to tell, and 87 people have received a disclosure. Members can see, therefore, that there is considerably more interest in having such a disclosure than there are people who currently have access to it.

Finally, Mrs Kelly and a number of others raised the issue of COVID-19's effect on domestic violence issues. I will put in context the figures that others said. Often, at this time, people in their home are not able to reach out and seek help. We need to reinforce the message, as many have done today, that there is a need for people to know that they are not alone simply because they are socially-isolating at home. Calls to the 24-hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline have increased by around 52% since the start of the lockdown period, with a 70% increase in the week before last. That is a very stark figure, given, as Paul Givan said earlier, that behind every one of those statistics is an individual in fear of their lives.

5.00 pm

Mark Durkan and others raised the issue of parental alienation. We believe that the Bill will allow that to be addressed because it covers the use of a child as part of the commission of an offence of abuse.

Doug Beattie mentioned a victims' commissioner, and I know that Doug is passionate about having a victims' commissioner. As I said in my opening remarks, I am open to considering whether a domestic abuse commissioner is required. However, a lot of oversight, guidance and direction are in place, and a commissioner could, essentially, lead to a duplication of effort and a drain on limited resources. Therefore, we need to be careful about what a domestic abuse commissioner's role would be. In other jurisdictions, one of their key roles is to ensure consistency of service provision. Locally, that is not such an issue, given our size and structure and the extent of engagement with statutory and voluntary sector partners. Many of the key organisations are, in fact, unitary bodies. We also have the interministerial group to provide oversight and direction, and we need, at this stage, to think about what additionality a commissioner would bring in the context of such abuse.

Doug also helpfully raised the diversity of victims and perpetrators. I spoke earlier about those of us of a certain vintage who have a particular mental image of domestic abuse. Often, if we do not name people — men who suffer domestic abuse and people from the LGBTQ community who suffer domestic abuse — they do not see

themselves in the messaging that we put out because they, too, have been conditioned by the images that have largely accompanied the talk of domestic abuse and public discourse. Worse than that, we have, through public discourse, in many ways allowed the myth that those who are subjected to domestic abuse are in some way weak, frail, feeble or not able to defend themselves from that abuse. In fact, very capable people, very assertive people, very intelligent and educated people, men who have had a career in what are hard and difficult industries and in a macho culture can still be subject to domestic abuse, controlling and coercive behaviour and violence. We should never make assumptions about the victim or the perpetrator in domestic abuse.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I commend her for introducing the Bill, and it was remiss of me earlier not to commend the work that Ms Sugden did as Minister and has done since on this hugely important issue.

The Minister spoke about the messaging that we put out. While that is good and has undoubtedly assisted with increasing the number of reports of domestic abuse that are made, does the Minister acknowledge the role of the mainstream media, if you like, including soap operas such as 'Coronation Street', in not merely entertaining but educating people? There are people sitting at home who may have been the victim of abuse for 20 or 30 years and not realised it until they saw it happen to someone on their screen.

Mrs Long: That is a good point. Often, when the adverts come on, people see them as a tea break and do not necessarily pay attention to what is being shown, even though the quality and reach of it can be quite important. However, they will often follow a storyline. You are right: when they watch the progressive change in an on-screen character whom they have formed a bond with and see that person become increasingly debilitated by the abuse that goes on and see the subtlety of it, it can drive it home that the relationship that they are in is broken and damaged. There is a massive opportunity, and I know that some people have been reflecting on some of the current storylines in, for example, 'EastEnders' that tackle domestic abuse and violence. Those are —.

Mr Durkan: They are always behind.

Mrs Long: Always following our lead, of course. I think it is hugely important that we do that.

Doug Beattie and others also raised support for the police. Yes, statutory bodies such as the police, the Public Prosecution Service, the Probation Board and others will have to meet those additional costs from their budgets. I would welcome the support of those of you who believe that their budgets should be bigger in making that case. It is expected that additional the investigative and prosecutorial work with the introduction and operation of the offence will be balanced by a reduction in other areas, as these offences will replace some equally complicated offences to prosecute at this time. A number of cases that could be taken forward, such as criminal damage, grievous bodily harm or assault charges, could form part of a new domestic abuse offence and therefore will not necessarily lead to a huge increase in workload. However, it will require an increase in training. That preparedness is something that Gerry Kelly and others have raised this afternoon and that I will address shortly.

Chris Lyttle also welcomed the Bill. That is important, given his role as the Chair of the Committee for Education, because there are huge educational issues here. A child's educational attainment, their mental health and their long-term social development can all be affected by living in an environment where there is a prevalence of domestic abuse or violence. I also believe that we need better relationship and sexuality education in our schools to better prepare those young people who, unfortunately, cannot look to their parents as a template for what a healthy relationship looks like. We need to offer people advice and guidance on what that might be. We should bear it in mind that many young people will carry the burden of knowing that abuse is going on at home and will be fearful of building relationships outside the home for fear of exposing their family to ridicule or gossip. They will be fearful, when they go to school, that they leave their mother, perhaps, alone with the abuser, or they are afraid that, when they come home, that their father will be upset because the mother has been with him all day and has been subjecting him to abuse. How those children react in the classroom is often one of the first indicators that there are problems at home, so it is also important that we educate not just children but the educators about recognising the signs of domestic violence and abuse.

With respect to Paul Frew, I thank him for his warm remarks about the officials, in particular Veronica Holland and her team. I am hugely indebted to them for the work that they have done on the Bill. It is true to say that we would not be standing here had they not continued diligently over the last three years to work hard and to make sure that it could proceed. I also thank former Minister Claire Sugden and David Ford, who started the ball rolling, gave impetus and helped shape the offence. It is hugely important that we recognise that this did not come about overnight but is something that we have been working on for some time.

Paul asked why the new offence with respect to stalking is not captured in the Bill and looked for reassurance that we would do that later in the year. The Bill is focused solely on tackling domestic abuse. It was much further advanced as an offence, and therefore, had we decided to wait until the stalking offence was developed, that would have delayed the introduction of this Bill and left people unprotected in the interim. I want this to remain focused on domestic abuse, and I recognise that stalking is not always in a domestic situation, though that often is the case. It is my intention to bring forward stalking legislation in the autumn. We are progressing with that well, including looking to introduce stalking protection orders, and we will work hard to ensure that those who engage in stalking activity will be better managed than through the current harassment legislation.

Paul Frew also raised the issue of timing and our estimate of how long this would take to operationalise. Training will be critical to the success of the offence. A lot of our statutory and voluntary sector organisations will need to train their front-line staff and to raise awareness of the offence in their organisations. There will also need to be work done with the judiciary. The police and others are already reviewing how they will do that and will create a training implementation team in the police to ensure the effective and timely operationalisation of the legislation. It will include representatives from the police learning and development team, domestic abuse specialists and

victim-orientated services. Training will also be provided for the Public Prosecution Service so that they too can appropriately deal with cases. Following Royal Assent, a minimum of a six to nine months is needed for that to happen, as well as the awareness raising that others have spoken of this afternoon. Elsewhere, it took nine to twelve months, but we believe that six to nine months, whilst ambitious, is possible. However, I stress that that also requires us, if we are to move this forward, to make every effort to move it forward quickly through the Assembly too. That is the best way of ensuring that people are protected from the earliest point.

Paul also raised the issue of amendments. I think that I have dealt with that already. I just want to deal with some of the questions about clauses, which I may also deal with elsewhere. Clause 3 actually allows for harm not to have been caused. It is intended to protect victims. Harm does not have to have been caused for the new offence to apply. No evidence of harm is needed. We are criminalising a course of behaviour, not the outcome. For example, if someone drives and recklessly endangers life, and a person ends up with a permanent disability, as opposed to dying, as a result, the maximum sentence for both offences will be the same: it is the course of action in which the driver engaged that determines the sentence, not the outcome. It will be the same with this offence in that, should people set out to behave in a certain manner, that manner of behaviour is being criminalised.

The issue was raised as to why clause 8 applies to young people. It applies in those cases where a young person is in an abusive relationship with another person. That person may be another young person or someone who is in their early twenties. It could be a 17-year-old who is in a relationship with someone who is in their twenties. They could be living together or apart, but that person could be subject to coercive control. It is important that those protections are in place. It does not cover a parent, but it could cover those who also reside in the family home. That is the purpose of clause 8.

I think that I have already addressed clause 13 with my answer to Paul Givan's queries. Essentially, clause 13 deals with the inability to prove the relationship, not the inability to prove the offence.

Finally, it was asked whether the scope is too wide: what is and is not controlling behaviour? It is important that awareness of what is and is not controlling or coercive behaviour is raised, so we are also preparing guidance on the operation of domestic abuse offence and aggravators, as well as domestic abuse more generally. That will be available publicly. That guidance will assist front-line organisations, while providing information to those who support victims or are interested in the subject area. It will set out what domestic abuse and abusive behaviour looks like. Comprehensive guidance will be essential in assisting the police to carry out effective domestic abuse investigations. We are working with colleagues in the police and public protection service, as well as partners, to ensure that that guidance is as accurate and thorough as possible.

With respect to Jemma Dolan's comments, she is, of course, correct to highlight the issue of cross-border living and why it is so important that we have extraterritorial jurisdiction on those offences, particularly, though not exclusively, for spanning the border. The offence will apply

where abusive behaviour takes place in Northern Ireland, regardless of the nationality of the individual. It will also apply if someone is a Northern Ireland resident and all or part of the abusive behaviour takes place elsewhere. If the perpetrator is a resident of Newry, their partner lives in Dundalk, and the pattern of abuse takes place in Dundalk, the offence could still apply under that provision. If someone lives and works in Dundalk but their partner lives in Newry, and the pattern of abuse takes place in Newry, that behaviour would constitute an offence in Northern Ireland as it took place here. The most appropriate jurisdiction for progression of the charges is likely to depend on the individual circumstances of the case, but it is important that we do not prevent those issues being prosecuted because of such barriers.

It is also correct that there are a number of other changes that are required to our legislation. I have already mentioned my intention to bring forward legislation on stalking. We are also looking at the issue of non-fatal strangulation. I am pressing forward with both of those as a matter of urgency.

I think that I have mainly covered Jonathan Buckley's comments, as I have Gerry Kelly's comments. I think that he made the point about the crucial balance between wanting to see this operationalised quickly and wanting to see it done effectively. The last thing that we want is to have an offence on the books that the police are not ready to investigate and the courts are not ready to prosecute. We must ensure that the two go hand in hand.

Kellie Armstrong raised the issue of the taboo that surrounds domestic violence — for example, victim shaming, that it is a weakness or a flaw and they are to blame for the behaviour — and the importance of recognising the diversity and complexity of family life and responding to that. I believe that the Bill does that but it also offers an opportunity for culture change around what we see as our responsibility as a community. Linda Dillon is correct that, for too long, people treated domestic abuse as though it was a private matter. It is not; it is a criminal offence.

5.15 pm

With regard to Rachel Woods' contributions on how we are going to raise awareness of domestic abuse and healthy relationships amongst young people, a programme of work will be needed to raise awareness of that new offence. Any work taken forward in the area will need to be available across a range of groups, particularly young people. There is also a responsibility on my partners in Government to ensure that there is increased awareness around what are healthy and, conversely, unhealthy relationships. The cross-departmental Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland: A Seven Year Strategy involves promoting increased knowledge and understanding of violence and abuse, promoting healthy relationships and early intervention for those at risk. My Department also funded Spanner in the Works theatre company to deliver performances of the play 'Mind Games' and 18 follow-up workshops to schools across Northern Ireland to educate young people early about abuse and controlling and coercive behaviour in relationships.

I think that I have dealt with the increase in cases and the impact that that may have on the police. We are also aware of the need for safe housing for people. Members will be

aware that this not a matter for me, but for the Communities Minister. However, as I have said, I am working closely with Deirdre Hargey to ensure that people can access safe accommodation. A consultation was previously undertaken on a review of social housing allocations and, in particular, how housing points allocation would ensure that victims of domestic abuse could be better supported, and that could form part of those regulations coming forward. Minister Hargey is considering the way forward on the proposals contained in that review, and I have written to her seeking an update. I met with her and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to discuss provision, but let us bear in mind that it is not always appropriate that the victim should have to leave their home.

So, what is being done to support victims who prefer to remain in their own home rather than go to refuges? The Northern Ireland Housing Executive operates a sanctuary scheme for its high-risk tenants. The sanctuary scheme is a non-statutory, victim-centred initiative, which aims to enable households at risk of domestic violence or abuse to remain safely in their own homes by installing a sanctuary in the home once the perpetrator has left. That sanctuary comprises enhanced security measures and, where applicable, a sanctuary room. That is designed to reduce repeat incidents of domestic violence, minimise disruption of having to move or become homeless and to enable families to remain in familiar areas close to support networks, friends and family. It also helps children to remain in their schools and maintain their friendships and support networks.

The Department for Communities, through the Housing Executive, has two actions in the five-year Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland Strategy. These are: to devise an action plan that will address the recommendations of the research project that considered the extension of the sanctuary scheme to provide victims with the choice to remain in their own home or seek re-housing for all tenants; and to work with the Housing Executive and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations to consider an extension of the sanctuary scheme to housing associations as well. These actions will provide more security of tenure when it is appropriate for a victim and where they choose to remain in their home.

Rachel Woods also referred to leave for domestic abuse. It has been tackled in other jurisdictions. A private Member's Bill was introduced last year in the Dáil but it did not actually make it through before the Parliament was dissolved. That legislation would have given 10 days' domestic violence paid leave. There may be merit in exploring that locally, but, rather than delaying the Bill, we should ensure that the domestic offence is legislated for as soon as possible. Importantly, my Department and the Department of Health published guidance in November 2018 for employers on developing a workplace policy on domestic and sexual violence and abuse. It was developed in partnership with key stakeholders to provide advice on how employers across the public, private and voluntary sectors can develop increased awareness and more effective responses to domestic violence and abuse for all staff.

The issue of the defence provision and whether that would allow people to harm vulnerable people was raised by Rachel Woods and Dolores Kelly. Where the behaviour causes harm to an individual, it would, of course, be

open for charges to be brought for assault or grievous bodily harm. The defence provision is not a charter to harm vulnerable people and would not cover deliberately harmful behaviour. It will apply only where an individual action could be considered reasonable, for example, to ensure the safety of someone and prevent them coming to harm. The police and the court would have to be satisfied that that is the case; otherwise that behaviour would be deemed to be abusive. Similar defence provisions are in place in other jurisdictions.

I will move on to Jim Allister. There is a slight irony in being lectured about how a reasonable person would behave by Mr Allister. However, I will, nevertheless, try to address his questions as best I can.

The local offence is very different from the constructed offence in England and Wales. The 2020 Westminster Bill does not deal with their offence: it is provided for in the Serious Crime Act 2015 and is limited to controlling and coercive behaviour. All that is in the England and Wales definition is covered by our Bill, and I think that our offence is more robust than that in England and Wales. For example, in Scotland, initial prosecutions have been higher than those in England and Wales under the offence in the 2015 Act. That is the outworking of the system.

As I said — it also applies to Mr Allister's query — the new offence criminalises patterns of psychologically or emotionally abusive behaviour; it does not necessarily criminalise the harm caused. It is possible for a person who is psychologically robust or someone who has, within their own psyche, normalised that behaviour not to be damaged or harmed by behaviour that a reasonable person would deem to be unreasonable. It is the course of action that is being criminalised, rather than someone simply being punished simply for the harm caused.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Long: I will.

Mr Allister: It was not unreasonable to ask the Minister about this. The offence has at its heart stopping abusive behaviour and defines abusive behaviour as violence and threatening or coercive behaviour — I paraphrase — but is she seriously saying to the House that, in the absence of those, behaviour that has none of those anticipated consequences can still be found to be criminal? I will put it to her like this: does she seriously expect any jury ever to convict anyone if they are told, "This is about domestic abuse against Mrs Brown. Mrs Brown suffered no harm and suffered none of the matters that make up abuse, but you should convict anyhow"? Does she seriously think that she will ever get a conviction based on that?

Mrs Long: If there were no evidence that abuse had occurred, no evidence that harm had been done and no evidence that the perpetrator had engaged in a series of abusive behaviours, there would be no expectation of that person being found guilty. That is how the justice system works. However, if someone has engaged in a course of action that a reasonable person would deem to be abusive and coercive behaviour, even if harm has not been caused to the individual who was subject to that, whether because of their resilience or because they have normalised that behaviour in their mind, it would still be possible to prosecute. It has been done successfully in Scotland. It is not the case that this will not be able to be pursued,

nor would I want to create an offence that could not be pursued in court.

Part of the difficulty with the stretch that the Member makes is that he has engaged this afternoon in an argument that, while it has at its core important questions, he took to *reductio ad absurdum*. He suggested that, in a case where there was no intent and no harm, the person involved would get the maximum sentence of 14 years. I have considerably more faith in defence barristers and the judiciary than Mr Allister has, because it is clear that, if serious harm has not been done, it is unlikely that that person would be subject to the maximum penalty. If a serious and prolonged course of action designed to intimidate and threaten has not happened and there is no evidence that it has happened, how could that person then be subjected to the maximum penalty? The difficulty with this is that, while, at the core of the question, there is a nugget of something, stretching the reality to suggest that people will end up in jail for 14 years for doing nothing, essentially, or that someone against whom there is no coherent and cohesive evidence will be able to be prosecuted is simply false logic.

I want to move on to address the issues raised by Claire Sugden. The Department is preparing guidance on the domestic abuse offence and on the aggravator, as well as on domestic abuse more generally. That guidance will be made publicly available. We are also working to raise awareness through a media campaign to allow people to better understand the domestic abuse situation and to better respond to it. It is important that we raise awareness, and today has been one opportunity of many that we will have to do so.

I am encouraged by the support shown by Members. We are all impatient for change and want to see the timely passage of the Bill through the Assembly. I ask again for your support in keeping the Bill focused on the current provisions, to deal with the new domestic abuse offence and to look at material policy amendments being dealt with through a future legislative vehicle. While I understand that the delay of three years since the last time that that promise was made has caused some to be nervous, I think that, next year, we will be able to proceed with a miscellaneous provisions Bill. We have already forwarded a number of sections to the Office of the Legislative Counsel and to drafting. We are working to develop it as we speak. I am confident that there will be opportunities to do it again in this mandate.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I thank everyone who contributed today. It was a useful and constructive discussion. I commend the Bill to the House for its approval, and I wish the Committee well in its scrutiny of the Bill, should it pass. It goes without saying that, as part of the process, my officials and I will do all in our power to ensure that the Committee can undertake that scrutiny as diligently and as effectively as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill [NIA Bill 03/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Second Stage of the Bill has been agreed. It stands referred to the Committee for Justice.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stafford] in the Chair)

Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Communities to move the Final Stage.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill [NIA Bill 04/17-22] do now pass.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the Bill.

5.30 pm

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thanks very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and, again, thanks to Members. I welcome the opportunity to speak about my Bill, which responds to the coronavirus outbreak and the public health emergency that has followed.

Due to the crisis caused by the pandemic, it has been necessary for me to take steps to introduce measures to help prevent and reduce significant numbers of households coming under threat of being homeless at a time of crisis and when housing, health and other public services are under extreme pressure, and where there is a significant risk to individuals, their health and their well-being as a result. The Bill is necessary during this unprecedented public health emergency to ensure that private renters are provided with protections during this difficult crisis. Any delay would be a delay on those protections. That is the critical point. The public health advice is clear: stay at home, protect our key workers and save lives. I also consider the Bill necessary to prevent the spread of coronavirus and to provide private renters with additional support as we battle COVID-19.

The fear around challenging landlords, or others, in court, as a result of this response, has been touched on. I do not fear any landlord or developer; I never have. In fact, as a community activist and as a political activist, I have fought landlords, all the way to the High Court, about the rights of communities, and I will continue to do that. I do not fear any of them. My concern is around the timescale and the response. If you start to get into an argument around rights, you leave people open to having no protection. It would be irresponsible of me, or anyone in the Chamber, to do that, because it would mean that people would be unprotected for a longer period. That would be a bigger disgrace.

The response to the public health emergency will endeavour to reduce the movement of people between households in the private rented sector. That will allow the shielding of vulnerable people, self-isolation and social distancing in line with public health advice.

Private renters continue to be a group who are facing significant concerns and anxieties during this period, particularly due to the loss of employment for many. These are extraordinary times in which a number of people will temporarily struggle to pay their rent through no fault of their own. In the meantime, they need certainty in their

homes, and they need to be assured that they are safe and that their landlords cannot move to evict them. The Bill will ensure that no renter in private accommodation will be forced out of their home during this difficult time.

Landlords will be required to give tenants 12 weeks' notice to quit before seeking a court order to begin proceedings to evict. That will reduce the possibility of tenants in the private rented sector becoming homeless and mean that no tenant is evicted because of an inability to pay rent during this period of economic disruption. My Department will publish guidance in relation to the legislative change that will assist tenants and landlords in better understanding the new rights and obligations that will come into effect under the new law.

Numerous stakeholders, such as officials from other Departments, Legal Services and, importantly, those at the grassroots, such as the housing rights sector, have worked closely with the Department in the development of the Bill, and I take this opportunity to thank them for their contributions. I extend my thanks to them for the speediness with which they responded to this emerging situation. I join those across government and the health service to urge everyone to stay at home and stay safe. I thank Committee members and the Chair for their support in helping to get the legislation through so quickly. I also thank Assembly officials, my departmental officials and my legal team who have worked to help achieve that. David and Eilish, who have worked on it, are in the Chamber this evening.

I hope that all parties can give the Bill their full support, and I hope that they understand the reasons why I have brought the Bill and why I do not want a delay in it: now is the time for action, not delay. I commend the Bill to the House.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I rise to give the Committee's perspective. Despite the haste with which this Bill has progressed through the House, it will bring some comfort to those people in the private rented sector who fear eviction as a result of the loss of income due to COVID-19. The Bill is proportionate, broadly equating to the three-month mortgage holiday for mortgage holders, which includes buy-to-let landlords.

Fundamentally, extending the notice-to-quit period from four to 12 weeks allows all parties, but particularly tenants and landlords, the time required to come to arrangements in respect of rent payments. In that regard, the Bill does not give carte blanche to tenants not to pay their rent. Importantly, it will also allow people to continue to adhere to public health advice on social distancing, self-isolation and shielding without the added anxiety of an eviction notice hanging over their heads.

Indeed, since the Committee was last briefed on the Bill, the Department has subsequently issued guidance to landlords and tenants on the Department's expectations that landlords and tenants will come to reasonable agreements on the level of rent that tenants are able to pay. That is in the context of the Committee's recognition that tenants will be able to avail themselves of financial support, such as the furlough scheme, discretionary support and universal credit.

In effect, the 12-week period gives tenants and landlords time to reach agreement without recourse to evictions. Of course, none of us knows what the situation will be

like after the initial 12-week period has finished, so the flexibility to extend this period is important. As I mentioned last week, 18% of the population live in accommodation in the private rented sector in 134,000 properties.

The Committee, like all Members of this House, recognises the potential for tenants in rent arrears to be evicted and rendered homeless. That would simply shift the problem from one part of our system to another. The question of how we emerge from this crisis, even in the midst of managing it, is gaining more traction. It is, therefore, welcome that the Department is engaging with the courts service and landlords so that there is no default to landlords seeking court orders to evict tenants as the crisis subsides and thus increase the number of homeless here in Northern Ireland.

The Committee welcomed the Bill and agreed to the accelerated passage procedure, reflecting the urgency with which it needed to be enacted. The Committee recognises this legislation as another element in our approach to supporting those people who are most in need, and we therefore lend the Bill our support.

Mr Durkan: I support the Bill. Members and the Minister will be relieved to hear that I will not rehearse all the points that I and others made last week and some again this morning and some again this afternoon. One thing that I really want to do is place on record again our thanks to the Minister and also to the Department, the Housing Executive and those working in the housing and homelessness sector, whether it be on the phone lines or on the ground. They have performed brilliantly throughout this crisis, and I am sure that they will continue to do so.

I will touch also on the importance of continuing the work with landlords. They are a critical part of the housing jigsaw. Another thing that I might elaborate a wee bit on, which the Minister might not be as happy about, is that a week has passed since we raised the issue about support for students. I am not going to apologise for raising that again. We know that the Department for the Economy is responsible for students, but Minister Hargey has informed us of her involvement in cross-departmental efforts to sort out a safety net for students, especially those still paying rent for properties that they can no longer inhabit. As a consequence of the economic situation and the lockdown, those students are unable to find employment and have returned to and placed an additional financial burden on already struggling households, all of which is bound to have a huge impact on a student or any person's mental health as well.

We see how well the Minister's Department was able to work with Education to find a solution for, and ensure support for, children and families dependent on free school meals. We need to see similar collaboration to support students. I accept that this Bill was not the vehicle to bring in that support, but there are people in real hardship: they really need help. Therefore, I will ask the Minister for an update on that at the earliest possible opportunity. On this Bill, we have no problem supporting it and welcome it very much.

Mr Buckley: I echo the comments of Mr Durkan and I do not intend to go over the ground that I was on last week. We have well rehearsed the merits of this Bill, albeit within very difficult circumstances. The Bill is a direct response to COVID-19 and the need to have some sort of remit and responsibility placed upon those in private accommodation,

landlords etc. It is broadly in line with the provisions that are already in place for those within Housing Executive properties. Again, it allows the Minister flexibility during this moving situation to broadly reflect the three-month mortgage holiday for landlords. *[Interruption.]* Is that an intervention, maybe? *[Laughter.]* I will gladly give way.

Given the situation we find ourselves in, the flexibility and the timely nature of the Bill are fair. I hope the Minister will indulge me, and indeed you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, if I ask another question of the Minister because perhaps this will be the only opportunity when she will be able to address it in the House. I pay tribute to the House authorities and, indeed, you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and how you have conducted the business within this place during the period of COVID-19. Stormont has, indeed, led on that, and Westminster is now meeting as well — that has been important.

My point still stands, and I am sure other Members will agree, councils are a key linchpin in the response required to COVID-19 and the Minister has responsibility for them. Many of the chief executives are actually hiding behind the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 and the need for public admittance to public galleries. Can the Minister respond on this issue and maybe provide detail at a later date? Again, the detail that we see here with the private tenancies, there is indeed a nature within local councils that they must react in a way that is suitable to the response that we need. I know that the Minister will maybe take this up later.

By and large, as we move forward, I welcome the Minister's commitment to legislation to protect those in private rented accommodation. In many regards, they are among the most vulnerable in society, and we have watched as the Minister has put in place different provisions to provide help for those in vulnerable positions. Equally, we must go above and beyond what is there at present. I know your Department is actively looking at the supermarket priority list at the moment, but we are in the midst of this epidemic and I hope that the Minister will seek some clarity on that to get that scheme implemented. I appreciate the indulgence to go beyond where we are. I thank the Minister for listening.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member veered very far from the content of the Bill, but given that he prefaced his bad behaviour with nice remarks about me, he will learn that flattery will get him everywhere. *[Laughter.]* I call the Minister to make a winding-up speech on the debate.

Ms Hargey: Thank you. I am not going to talk for too long. Again, I take the opportunity to thank the Committee, and its Chair, for the speed in which it approached the Bill; the Speaker's Office for allowing this to be done in two days; all of the Members who have contributed to the debate and who want to get this legislation through as soon as possible; the staff within the Department; and the activists in the community for the community response, which has been amazing throughout this pandemic: they have worked together and collaborated. What it has really shown is that things that could not be moved before, could be moved during the pandemic and, if they can be done during the pandemic, they can certainly be done after it. Hopefully, there will be a lot of lessons learned as a result of this in the time ahead.

5.45 pm

The issue of students is not within my remit. That said, it has come up as an issue. As an elected representative for the South Belfast constituency, which includes the Holylands, I know that we are cheek by jowl with a local university and there are a lot of students. I have been in contact with the Department for the Economy, which has responsibility for the student hardship fund, and it is looking at additional resources and what else can be done.

I have acted on anything within my remit. I have seen what we can do about the guidance on additional financial support. I have declared an emergency to ensure that groups such as students can avail themselves of that support. I have moved on those issues but, if it is not within my competency or remit, I cannot go into another Department and tell it what to do. I encourage Members to engage in a collaborative way with other Ministers, as I will do. I am sure that those Ministers will take steps to deal with the issue and, again, I ask Members to take it up and engage in a constructive way with the Minister for the Economy.

I want to thank people. I will provide an update on the issue of councils and supermarket priorities. We hope to have movement on that issue in the next week.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill [NIA Bill 04/17-22] do now pass.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I move to the adjournment, I am not sure whether Members have received notification, but there will be a meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Response to COVID-19 on Thursday. The Ministers of Health and Agriculture have requested to address the Committee.

Adjourned at 5.47 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 5 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, let me begin this morning by, again, formally recording the Assembly's condolences to those families who have been bereaved by COVID-19 since we last met and recording our admiration and appreciation for all who are working on the front line to try to prevent other families from losing those who are dear to them.

Committee for the Executive Office: Deputy Chairperson

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I wish to advise the House that the Speaker has received notification of the resignation of Mr Mike Nesbitt as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office with immediate effect. The nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party has informed the Speaker that Mr Doug Beattie has been nominated as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office, also with immediate effect. Mr Beattie has accepted the nomination, and the Speaker is satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Executive Committee Business

Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform the Assembly that the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill received Royal Assent on Monday 4 May 2020. It will be known as the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020, and it will be chapter 2.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A: Suspension

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The first item on the Order Paper is a motion to suspend Standing Orders. This will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I again object that for the fourth time without debate — that is critical — the House is about to abrogate fundamental scrutiny powers of Ministers by, yet again, removing the right of Members of the House to ask questions for oral answer and topical questions of Ministers. I think that that is a fundamental mistake in itself. I understand that some Ministers are at the forefront of the coronavirus crisis and the handling of it, but some are not. Why can they not come to the House and answer questions? Why should the House decide another month's exclusion of that — another month of trampling of scrutiny in the House — and to do all that without debate? The Business Committee could have brought, along with the motion, a motion to suspend Standing Order 12(7) to allow debate on what we are going to be asked to nod through. It did not even do that. That is wholly disrespectful of the rights of the House and the scrutiny that the House is supposed to afford to Ministers.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have sympathy with the Member's point. At its meeting last week, the Business Committee reviewed the decision on Assembly questions and agreed to extend that suspension, as the Member noted, for a further four weeks to allow Departments to focus on the delivery of public services to deal with COVID-19. That decision will be reviewed by the Business Committee at the end of this month. The Member has put his comments on record and I hope that they will be considered when the Business Committee looks at the matter again.

Mr K Buchanan: I beg to move

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 10 June 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Allister: No.

Question put a second time and agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As there are Ayes on all sides of the House and, at the second time of asking, there were no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community consent has been demonstrated. The motion is agreed.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 10 June 2020.

Ministerial Statements

COVID-19

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, I have relaxed the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they want to ask a question. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called but they can do that by rising in their place, as well as notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members again to be concise in asking their questions. As this is a plenary session, we do not have the flexibility afforded by the Ad Hoc Committee. If Members monopolise time, those who are further down the speaking list will not be called. I ask Members not to make speeches and to keep their questions short and focused.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to update Members on the ways in which my Department is contributing to the fight against COVID-19. At the outset, I want to recognise that while this is a challenging time for all of us, my thoughts are with those families who have, sadly, lost loved ones and those individuals who are fighting against COVID-19 on the front line.

We are in week 7 of the lockdown. Families, businesses and communities across Northern Ireland have been incredible in playing their part to save lives and protect each and every one of us from the virus. The task has not been easy. Friends and families have been torn apart, unable to share a cup of tea, a hug or even just chat on the same sofa. That is not the life that we all know and it is not easy on any of us. This will be a lonely time for many people — a challenging time — and it is important that, in this place, we say to people at home that it is OK not to be OK. We need to come together to help and support each other as we make our way through.

Lockdown is not easy. It goes against everything that we know and who we are and our need for social interaction, not least with those whom we love. As Members will be aware, the Executive will be reviewing the regulations this week. Guided by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, we will look closely at what opportunity there is to safely ease some of the restrictions. A robust testing, tracing and tracking system across the island must be a critical component of that.

We all need to work together in the fightback against COVID-19, and, today, I take the opportunity to provide you with an update on the further action that my Department has taken since my statement to the Ad Hoc Committee on 16 April, as we remain focused on, first and foremost, protecting people and keeping them safe and, in doing so, minimising, as much as possible, disruption to our services.

I am conscious that one of the areas of significant disruption for people is the provision of MOTs by the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). My Department has worked hard to find a range of solutions for all types of vehicles, and there are now a significant number of exemptions and extensions in place until MOT services can be safely

resumed. In addition, the new lifts are being installed on a phased basis and will be fully in place by the start of July, unless the MOT centres are needed for COVID-19 testing, which I have said consistently will be the priority for as long as they are needed.

The provision of temporary exemption certificates (TECs) has been effective in keeping people on the road and ensuring that vehicles can be taxed. However, some of the TECs are starting to come to an end and will need to be reviewed. In considering that issue, I have had to take into account the volume of vehicles currently impacted and the fact that COVID-19 restrictions are likely to result in a suspension of most, if not all, MOT services for some time to come. It is a simple yet challenging fact that, when MOT centres reopen, there will not be the capacity to test all the cars that have missed out along with those that need to be tested normally at that time. I believe that it is really important to minimise the disruption as far as possible. I am, therefore, announcing today that I have decided that DVA will continue to issue TECs to vehicles that have already been issued one, whether they be private cars, goods vehicles, trailers or motorcycles, until their normal annual MOT date. That means that a vehicle will get an exemption for one year, which will bring it back into the system when there is capacity to test it. When vehicle testing services are properly restored, vehicles that are due their annual MOT at that time will be tested as normal and, therefore, will not be disrupted.

The TECs will be extended to the maximum time frames set out in legislation, but, importantly, when each is rolled forward, they will provide full cover for one year from the normal MOT expiry date in 2020 until the date on which the vehicle is due for test in 2021. The PSNI, DVA roadside enforcement and the Association of British Insurers are aware of this position. It is important to remember that these are temporary arrangements, and I remind drivers that they are responsible under the law for the roadworthiness of their vehicle at all times and should maintain it to the appropriate standard.

In addition, I recognise that the current process has been difficult and confusing for customers, with many queries raised about whether a TEC is in place and the time frame for refunds. Therefore, I am also announcing today that an automatic process for the issuing of TECs will apply from 11 May. That will significantly reduce administration for customers and staff. From 11 May, customers will no longer have to book a test that they know that they will never attend and to pay over money only for it to be returned to them in a refund some weeks later. Instead, vehicles that require a new TEC or require one for the first time will automatically be updated on the DVA system and on the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) system in Swansea so that the vehicle can be taxed. The DVA will not issue a hard copy of the certificate to customers. Instead, the nidirect website will signpost customers to the DVLA website, where they can check whether their vehicle has a current TEC. We will, of course, continue to issue TECs and to provide refunds for bookings that have already been made. Unfortunately, for vehicles registered in Great Britain that have been brought and transported to Northern Ireland, it is not possible to issue an automatic TEC. Those customers will need to contact the DVA for that to be done manually, and, again, details for how to do that will be on nidirect.

10.45 am

Taxis and buses are subject to separate legislation, and a different approach has been adopted. Through a change in legislation for taxis and a determination by the Department for buses, I have ensured that those vehicle licences that expire during the current emergency will be automatically renewed without the need for prior testing. I recognise that clear communication with customers is important and that it needs to improve. I have asked DVA to ensure that comprehensive advice and clear guidance is made available to customers on the nidirect website. I hope that this provides some reassurance to Members and their constituents during this difficult time.

I was pleased to announce last week that the Department is working in partnership with the British Medical Association and our incredible GPs to prioritise the processing of medical forms for those key workers who need them to renew their licences. Medicals are essential to ensure road safety for both the driver and other road users. However, I appreciate that, for some, further specialist assessments may be needed before licences can be renewed. With the strain on the medical profession during this crisis, getting access to this specialist assessment is proving difficult for many drivers, and my Department continues to work hard to find ways of addressing that. I appreciate the patience of Members and the public during this crisis, and we continue to work hard to find a solution, including exploring legal options on the way forward. I hope to be in a position to update Members and affected drivers very soon.

The lack of testing, and indeed the suspension of other DVA services, has meant a considerable loss of income for DVA whilst it continues to incur the costs of staff and other bills. If the COVID-19 suspension lasts three months, DVA will lose income of £8.6 million. Indeed, I have already advised that DVA has identified estimated additional COVID-19-related pressures of up to £181 million in total. These cost estimates are based on the information available and the current assumptions on the impact and duration of the crisis.

The reality is that, across every Department, the current public health emergency requires a level of response that cannot be contained within conventional budgets or, indeed, conventional processes. All of these pressures arise as a result of lost income from various business areas, including Northern Ireland Water, Translink and DVA, and from sources of income such as planning fees and fares on the Strangford ferry.

At this point, I highlight the particular challenges that Translink faces. The need to stay at home to save lives has clearly had very significant implications for our publicly-owned public transport provider. While my Department remains the only Department, outside of the Executive Office, not to have received an allocation yet from the Department of Finance's COVID-19 budget, I welcome Executive colleagues' commitment to supporting and funding our public transport network.

We are seeing across the world that Governments are recognising the crucial need to invest in infrastructure as we recover from this crisis and build our new society from it. We should be no different if we want to deliver the radical change that our communities and our environment desperately need.

On Friday, I was pleased to announce the provision of a financial support package of £5.7 million, with the costs being shared by the Executive and the British Government, to support our airlines and airports. This assistance will provide financial aid to City of Derry Airport and Belfast City Airport to help with their operating costs as so much of their business has been affected. Finance is also being made available to keep the remaining flights operating out of both airports.

While my powers in respect of airports are limited to regulation, I have been able, working with Executive colleagues and the Department for Transport, I have been able to secure this unique package of support for our airports at this difficult time. It is this type of collaborative working that will get us through this crisis and ensure our recovery from it.

Members will also be aware that, again through collaborative work across these islands, I was able to secure our supply chains with funding of up to £17 million, financed in partnership by the Executive and the British Government, to support our three ferry operators along our five critical routes — a package that will ensure that food, goods, medicines and personal protective equipment (PPE) will continue to come across to the North. I am, however, acutely aware that the haulage sector is also crucial to the effective functioning of supply chains. Although responsibility for that sits with the Department for the Economy, I will continue to work closely with colleagues to do all that I can to help the industry in its crucial role of securing critical supply chains during this difficult time.

The performance of the planning system will also have a critical role to play in supporting our future economic and societal recovery, so we need to keep plans and projects safely moving through the system. I will bring you up to date with some of the measures that I have brought forward.

Last week, I made regulations to suspend temporarily the requirement to hold a public event as part of the pre-application community consultation process for major applications. I assure Members that that is not, in any way, to remove the need for public consultation, which is a critical part of the planning process; rather, it is about doing it in a different way during the crisis, in line with clear public health advice. I have therefore published practice guidance on appropriate measures to replace face-to-face public events. It covers online engagement and other methods, including the safe distribution of leaflets and newsletters, and, where people do not have access to the Internet, telephone consultations. My chief planner has written again to councils with further advice covering a wide range of issues, including the operation of planning committees and planning decision-making; the role of statutory consultees; the duration of planning permissions; and support for pragmatic measures to keep delivering local planning services.

While we continue to do all that we can to protect our communities from COVID-19, we must also seize the chance for change. In responding to the difficulties, we have learnt lessons. We know that having fewer cars on the roads reduces emissions. More walking and cycling means healthier bodies and healthier minds, time to talk and time to be together. We have to use what we have learnt to imagine and plan for a better, greener, healthier,

happier future. To that end, I have met representatives of the business sector and green sector to start an early discussion on how my Department can help shape a recovery and what we can learn from our response to the pandemic. We all share the belief that infrastructure spending will be crucial to restarting the economy. Investing in our transport system and our water and sewerage network would kick-start the construction sector and its supply chain.

We also need to think about how we enable and support social distancing as we bring people back into the heart of our towns and cities and about how we give them the confidence to make the decision to return for leisure, as well as for work, when the time is right. At the same time, I am very aware that this health emergency has forever changed the ways in which we live and work, and it is difficult to ascertain the impact that it will have on how we use those spaces in future. However, in the darkness of the pandemic, we are being presented with an opportunity to reimagine those places, and it is one that we should seize.

In order to give a real focus to a green recovery, where we will embed more active ways of travelling in the very heart of our overall transport policy, I am delighted to announce today that I am creating a walking and cycling champion in my Department. Our champion will ensure that we deliver on our commitment to increase the percentage of journeys made by walking and cycling, thereby inspiring our communities, restructuring our spaces, changing forever the way in which we live and changing it for the better. I want to increase the space available for people who want to walk and cycle by extending pavements, pedestrianising streets and introducing pop-up cycle lanes. I have already identified some areas in Belfast city centre and in Derry city that can be quickly transformed, and I intend to work with councils right across the North to identify more as a matter of urgency. Doing that will transform communities right across Northern Ireland and inspire a new way of living in our new world of this new normal.

I am clear also on the need for the work to be done collaboratively, so I will also be asking the walking and cycling champion to establish immediately an action-focused group of stakeholders, both in and outside government, to provide quick advice, to challenge my Department and to ensure that we consider opportunities and build on the positive changes that we are seeing when it comes to higher levels of walking and cycling during the current emergency. I also want us to work in collaboration with communities, including, for example, to identify and create quiet streets where pedestrians, cyclists and play have priority, and motor vehicles are guests.

I am determined that we take action, particularly to address traffic issues in inner-city neighbourhoods. I want to make sure that we do things with, not to, communities. We have a wealth of organisations with skills in working to help residents to develop a new vision for their areas. I want to harness those skills to improve neighbourhoods and improve the quality of life of all of our citizens.

This is not just an environmental imperative. We need to do this because it is a public health imperative. I shall keep a close eye on progress. I want to see ideas not just being talked about but being turned into results that improve everyone's well-being. I am also looking for opportunities to weave blue infrastructure together with new cycle paths and footpaths, recognising that the better management of

water in and through urban environments can reduce flood risk while creating more attractive and environmentally friendly spaces.

This may be ambitious, but the one lesson that COVID-19 has taught us is that this is our world, and we must protect it by building a better future that delivers more for our citizens socially and economically, and delivering cleaner, greener and healthier communities.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to questions to the Minister, I have a few housekeeping notifications. First, it was spotted last week that there was a bit of backsliding on social distancing, so some microphones have been removed from the Chamber. Members, you must be directly in front of the microphone to be heard.

Secondly, as I said at the start, because this is not an Ad Hoc Committee meeting but a plenary sitting of the Assembly, questions need to be focused and sharp to ensure that everyone gets called to ask their question. Just as questions need to be sharp, answers need to be sharp. I am sure that they will be.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the clarity given today on MOTs and the commitment by the Executive in the last number of days to supporting airports as well as city deals and their associated infrastructure projects.

The statement does not mention the outstanding matter of financial support for hauliers and taxi drivers. It is also disappointing that the problem accessing medical assessments has still not been resolved. In addition, DVA has introduced a fully online system for driving licence renewal. This is proving problematic for those who do not have access to the online system, with hard copy applications being returned. Can the Minister give a clear timeline for when these matters will be fully addressed?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. We have been working very hard across the Executive on the issue of hauliers. I have been working with the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Agriculture. We engage very regularly with the Department for Transport and the UK Treasury. We are clear that we need to get support to our haulage industry because it has a critical role to play in securing our supply chains, and we will keep up the pressure on that.

On the taxis issue, the Member will be aware that, as Minister for Infrastructure, I have responsibility for regulation. I have put a number of solutions in place. The one that is outstanding is the specialised medical assessment. I am exploring two potential legal options. I hope to be in a position to give confirmation to Members and affected drivers as soon as possible. The challenge is getting a solution that is legally robust while being mindful of the need to ensure road safety for drivers and other road users.

On the issue of financial support for taxis, I am sure that the Member will also be aware that the Department for the Economy is responsible for financial support to those whose livelihoods have been very badly affected by this crisis. I have made representations to the Minister for the Economy, the Minister of Finance and the Minister for Communities on the potential of repurposing of taxi

drivers, because I recognise that they are one of the groups that have been really badly hit.

There have been issues with people being able to access and contact the DVA. We launched a single point of contact, the set email address. I am mindful that there are people who are unable to access services online.

I also have a duty to the safety of DVA staff, so we are working hard to see whether we can bring back workers on a safe basis to be able to process those applications and provide services to those who do not have any access to online.

11.00 am

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the announcement on walking and cycle lanes, an issue that I have mentioned a number of times. Minister, can you elaborate on how we will realise the expansion of those cycling and walking lanes and on the issue of resources? Will that include physical structures like bollards? I see that Dublin City Council is engaging more with the public as part of this whole process, and I welcome the announcement that there will be a champion for all of this. Is there any intention to expand that consultation process?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I agree with the Member that this does present an opportunity to encourage and facilitate that modal shift that we have all been so passionate about. One example of a practical project can be found in Belfast. The bolder Belfast vision, which was produced in conjunction with Belfast City Council, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities, has a number of exciting projects around pedestrianisation and having more people-centred places. I think that my Department, working with the Department for Communities and the council, could look at lifting that.

At this moment, I am very focused on the need to identify and deliver on the ground quick and early wins. As you said, we have seen developments on Nassau Street in Dublin such as pop-up cycle lanes. We have seen in New York the pedestrianisation of streets. In Hackney in London, for example, we have seen the extension of pavements. I am very clear that the approach for the champion is to identify with the stakeholders early, quick wins that we can then build on.

I was very clear in my statement that I am a believer that things should not be done to communities but should be done with them. I have been engaging with Belfast Healthy Cities, for example, and with others. I am very clear that this has to be collaborative. We have to work with councils, and we have to work with communities. One of the ideas that I am particularly attracted to is quieter streets. Again, that would be very much led by residents. I am very committed to this.

On the issue of resource, it is absolutely going to be challenging. As this is a ministerial priority, I have asked my officials to identify what flexibility we have, but I am also very clear that I want to work with other government Departments. This is not just an issue for the Department for Infrastructure but is an issue for all of us. If we work collaboratively, we get the right outcomes and we also get more financial traction for each Department's budget.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she often referred to the importance that infrastructure has in enabling the economy to return to normal and to drive forward. Minister, you will be aware of the work, particularly in New Zealand, to get infrastructure projects shovel-ready for when the construction industry returns to normal. Have you given any consideration to the approach taken and whether there is an opportunity to green infrastructure?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She asks a very important question. We have to invest in our infrastructure — that is key as an economic multiplier for our construction industry, but it also provides a real opportunity. I have been watching very closely what is happening in New Zealand, where there is a commitment to progress shovel-ready projects as part of the recovery from COVID. I am also aware that there is a movement in New Zealand to make sure that those construction projects also have a very clear environmental element to them. I have already asked officials to try to explore that. As an Executive, we recognise the importance of investing in infrastructure, and, as it is being recognised as a key enabler right across the globe, I hope that we recognise that here and, more importantly, that we act on it and invest in our infrastructure to create that economic effect and to get us to a better place in tackling the climate emergency.

Mr Beggs: I too thank the Minister for her statement and the decision to further extend the temporary exemption certificates for MOTs. That has been essential, and that will be automated shortly. Is the Minister reviewing a wide range of regulatory provision and licensing in her Department? Other areas also require to be addressed. I am hearing responses from those who require bus operator licences at some point. That mechanism needs to be followed up. I am also hearing from those who have been driving with a one-year international driving licence in Northern Ireland and who are unable to carry out the practical driving test.

Ms Mallon: I recognise that this crisis has thrown up a number of difficulties and I think that that is inevitable when you are running a service that is interacting with thousands and thousands of people weekly, which DVA does across its range of services.

In terms of licensing issues, if we take the example of taxi drivers, there was an issue around PSV extensions. We have addressed that through a free-of-charge six-month extension. There was an issue for taxi drivers of access to online training. As a result of this crisis, we have increased the number of online courses. There is an issue around GP medical forms, which are required by some drivers for their licences, and we are working with the BMA to address that. The one particular issue that we have not completely resolved yet is about those drivers who require a further specialised medical assessment. That situation has arisen because all of our medics are focused on COVID-19, but I hope to be in a position very soon to present a solution to Members and those drivers.

The situation has brought home to me that we should have been in a much more advanced stage in DVA in terms of automated services. I hope that the Member recognises that we are trying to address one aspect of that from 11 May, but I am very mindful that we need to extend that across other services where it is not applicable at the moment.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement, particularly in relation to MOTs. That brings a lot of clarity to people. At the outset, I declare that I was previously an employee of Translink.

The decisions that will be made in Northern Ireland in the next weeks are going to affect generations to come, in terms of how we travel. The information that came forward recently that traffic in Northern Ireland has not dropped to the same level as other parts of the UK or Ireland is of real concern. To what extent, and how radical is the Minister prepared to be in her decisions going forward?

For example, you inherited a capital investment plan, with the York Street interchange and widening of the Sydenham bypass. Are you prepared to go ahead with the York Street interchange in its current form or are you prepared to look at that and also the Sydenham bypass?

In relation to active travel, the purchase of bicycles is a challenge for some people. Is the Department prepared to consider a voucher scheme to allow people to buy bicycles on a discounted basis?

Ms Mallon: Members are being very creative at getting multiple questions into one question. I admire them.

In recent days, we have seen an increase in the volume of traffic on our roads. That is a concern to me. The Northern Ireland Civil Service is carrying out a detailed analysis to understand why people are taking those journeys, and I think that it is critical that we understand and are informed by it. I repeat the message: only engage in travel if it is absolutely essential.

The York Street interchange is a commitment in New Decade, New Approach. It is a critical scheme. Given that we are going through this crisis, I think that as a general principle we should not be afraid of looking at things creatively and looking at things again. That applies to any of the schemes. I am willing to look at them creatively, but I recognise that the York Street interchange is a critical strategic project.

The Member asked about bicycles. Other countries have given a voucher towards the repair or purchase of a bicycle. That is something that I could feed through to the champion and the steering group to look at. My challenge is trying to have the ambition and also being able to finance that ambition. Realistically and honestly, we are not going to be able to do everything that we want to do, but we need to do the things that will have the maximum effect.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if they ask multiple questions the Minister is only obliged to answer one of them.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her statement. My question relates to furloughing in Translink because of the difficulties that they are under. I understand that Transport for London have furloughed 7,000 workers. The furlough scheme opened on 23 March. Has the Minister spoken about or looked at furloughing Translink workers, and what would that save in the budget here if it were possible?

Ms Mallon: The Finance Minister wrote to me and he suggested exploring the furloughing of Translink staff. On the back of that suggestion, the feasibility of that is being explored by Translink. My view is very clear and I have made it known to Executive colleagues. Taking the

decision to furlough public-sector staff is a significant issue, it is cross-cutting, and we should approach it as an Executive.

There are a number of practical difficulties with furloughing Translink staff. The furloughing scheme ends at the end of June. We are just a number of weeks out from that. I also have to grapple with the challenge of making sure that we have an essential public transport service for our key workers and that when we provide that we can ensure that social distancing can be maintained, so we require additional fleet to carry a much-limited number of passengers. I also need to make sure that there is a deep clean, so a number of staff are required to ensure that we can keep that transport network going and that we can do so safely. All that has to be taken in the round with the fact that, when we are encouraging people to come back to work and to do so safely, we should encourage them to have the confidence to be on our public transport network, and that will require that we have our public transport network in a good place and our employees ready to do all that work. I want to consider all these things in the round.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you mentioned the disruption to services, and you have been asked a question already about the haulage sector. I have been contacted by a number of people in the haulage sector who are deeply concerned about the supply chain not just now but in a few months' time. They want some indication from you of what kind of preparation is under way in your Department to ensure that the haulage sector is going to be ready for the full implementation of the Brexit protocol in eight months' time.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As she will be aware, the lead Department on that issue is the Department for the Economy, but I recognise the critical importance of it, which is why I am trying to do what I can to support her and to support us as an Executive. At the moment, I think that there is a recognition, certainly in the Department for Transport, of the critical role of our hauliers given our unique set of circumstances as an island. The focus at present is on providing the detailed evidence that the Treasury requires in order to provide that financial support. We are working with the sector very closely to try to get that detail across to evidence their case.

I think the Member made a very important point about Brexit. We are all, rightly, focused on COVID-19, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that 31 December is hurtling towards us, and that will present huge challenges. When you put Brexit and COVID-19 side by side, you will find that we are going to face huge and unprecedented challenges as an Assembly, an economy and a society. We should not lose sight of that in the midst of this, and preparations should continue.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you, Minister, for your statement to the House. I have one focused question for you. Car driving tests have been suspended for a number of weeks, and rightly so, but has any consideration been given to those who want to do their motorcycle test? They are prepared and ready to do it, and the motorcycle is a one-man/one-woman vehicle. The gear that people wear for the motorcycle indicates that it is safe enough and safe from a virus point of view, and there is social distancing. Has any consideration been given to looking at opening up that aspect of the testing so that somebody who is ready to do their motorcycle test can get it done?

Ms Mallon: Thank you for your question. In relation to the driving test, you are right: there is a distinction with those who are taking a car test, where there is close proximity to the examiner. We are looking to see whether there is anything that we can do with that. At present, we have not been able to find a solution; actually, nowhere across these islands has been able to find a solution to that.

The Member made a very interesting point about motorcycle testing, so I will commit to go back and ask officials to look specifically at that to see whether that is an aspect of the phased return that we could bring forward earlier. If he is agreeable, I can provide that update to him in writing.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you for that.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. Whilst I welcome the efforts that have been made in planning, it is very important that I highlight again the issue that is facing many people with planning permission that is due to expire during this pandemic. I have raised this with the Minister on a number of occasions. Does the Minister have any idea how many are due to expire or are at risk of falling?

How quickly could primary legislation be progressed to grant an extension to those with planning permission that is due to expire, because I know that it is a huge concern out there and I have been contacted by quite a number of agents and people with applications?

11.15 am

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She did ask about the total number of planning applications that are about to expire and I committed that officials would write to her. I do not know whether she has received that piece of correspondence but I can chase it when I go back upstairs.

Yes, planning permission has presented an ongoing difficulty and the Member is right that it requires primary legislation in Northern Ireland. As a Department, we thought that the Northern Ireland Executive might bring forward a COVID-19 Bill, as has happened in other cases, and we were keen to insert that piece of legislation in that. It does not seem as though that is going to happen, so I have asked officials to explore bringing forward primary legislation. The Member will understand that that takes time and it will not help those who are facing the imminent expiry of their planning permission. I have also said that I recognise that that is not ideal, but for those people the practical option facing them in the immediacy of their situation is either to renew, and that will cost a fee of one-quarter of the original fee, or to commence works. I urge that if people are going to commence works, they remain mindful of the case law so that any works that they can take are considered to be valid.

Mr Catney: Minister, I note your points about taxi drivers, and it is clear that you are doing all that you can to ensure that licensing and regulations are done as quickly as possible by your Department during these challenging times. However, there are still drivers out there who are struggling without any income. While that is not directly your responsibility, will you advise what your Executive colleagues are doing about it?

Ms Mallon: All of us are aware of the hardship that is being felt by the taxi industry and taxi drivers. We know them

because of the role that they play in our communities, and I am sure that many Members' family members and friends work in the industry. I have made representations to the Minister for the Economy and I know that she is trying to bring forward a range of financial support schemes for those who have been affected. A number of schemes have been implemented, and I know that she is working on others. I am hopeful that the Executive are in a position to be able to provide financial support to those taxi drivers who have had their livelihoods decimated as a result of this.

I have said all along that I feel that there is a huge opportunity for the repurposing of taxi drivers in delivering medicines from pharmacies and in delivering groceries, because we know the difficulties that people are having in ordering their food online and having it delivered. I have made representations to the Minister for Communities on that and I know that she has been working hard to explore that. As I said, I have made representations to the Minister for the Economy on financial hardship, so I am doing what I can to play my part on the regulatory aspect. I know that Executive colleagues are trying to do the same, given their responsibilities on that matter, too.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: When one of the lines in your question is, "While that is not directly your responsibility", it may be an indication that you are perhaps on the wrong track. If we could keep the questions directly related to the Minister's statement.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement and the update and I think that the provision of test centres for the COVID-19 test has been very positive. We appreciate the efforts that are being made there.

Does the Minister recognise the need for continued investment in our roads? If we look at the main roads into Belfast — if you take the A2 from Bangor — we have a backlog of traffic in the mornings to Holywood. I understand and have seen that if you take the M1, there is a backlog to Lisburn. If you take the M2, there is a backlog to Mallusk and beyond, and I am sure that many Members will concur with what I have said. Does the Minister recognise that, moving forward, it is important that we get the balance right? There is a push here for green and for the use of bicycles, which is fine for a few weeks and months of the year locally, but, for real transport, we need to get our roads moving, get the throughput moving and get vehicles flowing rather than being restricted through to city centres. We need to see an improved flow of our vehicles.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is right: maintenance of the road network is important. The Member will be aware that there were successive years of underinvestment as a result of cuts that were imposed on the Department. In fact, the recent Barton report said that we need to ensure recurring funding of £143 million per annum in order to prevent further deterioration of our roads. I have not been given an allocation that is anywhere near that amount.

I know that the Member is very passionate on doing — not in a derogatory sense — the basic things right, such as street lighting and roads, and the importance of that for communities. I share that passion. The challenge is that we need to maintain existing services, and, where we can, do things in an improved and better way. I do not want the Member to think that I am completely dismissive of the need to maintain the road network. I recognise its

importance. However, I also believe that we should have ambition and try to change the way in which we do things. That is why I am also very passionate about the whole active and sustainable travel agenda.

Ms C Kelly: Can the Minister assure the House that front-line workers, such as those in roads maintenance, public transport and NI Water, for example, are content with conditions in their workplace?

Ms Mallon: I will take Translink first. I have been very clear that, right across the Department, the safety of the public and staff is paramount. Translink has brought forward a number of initiatives. There are cough screens on every single bus. Bus and train drivers have been provided with gloves and hand sanitiser. A no-cash-back policy has been introduced in order to avoid transmission. There is increased cleaning of all vehicles. I want to put on record my appreciation to all Translink staff because they go to work to ensure that the rest of those who are engaged in essential work can get to and from work.

I have stressed the importance of ensuring that Northern Ireland Water workers are safe. I actually have regular conference calls with the chief executive to get assurances on that. In Roads Service, I have been very clear that, where people can work from home, they should, and, where work is essential and they cannot work from home — for example, to keep roads safe or prevent flooding — they can go to work, and we absolutely must ensure that they are kept safe through social distancing and the use of PPE.

As a Department, we engage regularly with trade unions and workers. I request very regular updates on any concerns that trade unions or workers have. I have also told Members that if they are aware of individual cases where someone feels that, as an employee, they are not being kept safe, I absolutely want to know about it.

Mr Lyttle: As chairperson of the Assembly's all-party group (APG) on cycling, I particularly welcome the Minister's commitment to active travel. It is a healthy, socially distanced and fun way for people to move. I welcome the walking and cycling champion and the ministerial advisory group. Hopefully, the Minister's early engagement with the all-party group on cycling was a helpful link to the ideas and people who are needed to realise the potential of active travel. However, she will be aware that it has taken over a year to fix obvious problems with one of the few dedicated cycle lanes in Belfast, at Alfred Street, and that consultation on the Belfast cycle network plan finished in 2017. What specific action will she take to progress those particular matters?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise his passion for the issue. Yes: it was very informative to go to the APG. I look forward to taking up its recent invitation to discuss some of that, and would be keen for the walking and cycling champion to accompany me.

What I have tasked the champion to do is to pull out what exists already. The Member referenced the Belfast cycle network plan and existing cycle routes that need to be improved. To improve an entire network requires investment. That has to be the approach. That will certainly be the focus of the ministerial advisory group and the champion. I am adamant that I will come back very quickly to Members in order to give them practical updates on what we are actually doing to deliver on the project. It is easy to

talk about those matters. You judge a person on what they actually do. I am very committed to delivering on that.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I am slightly surprised, if not disappointed, to learn that, although the furlough scheme was introduced on 20 March, there have not been further and definitive investigations in your Department, particularly for Translink workers.

Minister, what preparations or investigations has your Department undertaken to re-profile its budgets? Clearly, there are pressures on your budgets, and other Executive budgets, but there will be business areas that will have stopped, eased or spent less money than was predicted. Have you started to re-profile your budget?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Minister of Finance only raised the issue of furloughing with me towards the end of last week. It is clear that we need to take significant decisions, right across the Executive.

On the issue of re-profiling, this is not a normal budgetary process or a normal budgetary period. Where I can find easements and re-profiling, I absolutely will. The difficulty for my Department is that we have seen a dramatic reduction in revenue through Translink, the DVA and Northern Ireland Water because we have brought in measures to try to support businesses. That dramatic reduction in income sits alongside very high levels of static cost. I assure the Member that, where we can be creative in the budget, we will continue to do so. The challenge is that, in the COVID-19 budget, nothing has come across to the Department for Infrastructure as yet. If I could get some certainty around that, to ease the financial pressures, it would help me to identify where we have any flexibilities.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister, her Department and the front-line workers for the exceptional work that they have been doing to ensure that the wheels keep on turning to allow our society to keep functioning. I was astonished to learn, Minister, that despite everything that your Department is doing, you received zero funding in the COVID-19 budget allocation. Why did the Finance Minister and, indeed, the entire Executive, award COVID-19 funding to all Departments except yours? Particularly, given your Department's pressures to maintain key services, such as public transport, safe roads and clean drinking water, which are fundamental, not just to the COVID-19 response but to our recovery on this island. What happened to all in this together?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. To date, there has not been an allocation for the Department for Infrastructure. However, £95 million has been kept in the centre for a possible transport package and the support for ferries and airports has come from that. Members will be aware of the issues facing Translink alone, so the remainder of that pot of money is not sufficient to meet those financial pressures so that is a serious concern. I welcome, however, the Executive's commitment to fund Translink. They recognise that we need to have a publicly owned public transport network, not just for the economic and social benefits but for tackling the climate emergency. Yes, it was disappointing, but I continue to engage with the Finance Minister and I hope that, very soon, I will see an allocation to my Department so that I can properly plan and prepare.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I am glad to see that you are looking at pathways and ways of improving exercise for people. In rural areas, we have many villages that have footpaths along the outskirts and main routes etc. Over the years, these have become totally neglected because of budgetary pressures and they tend to be the last thing that is looked at. Many have grass growing through them and although some of them have what used to be lights along them, they have been switched off and are not used anymore. Can you give an assurance that, with your new thoughts and new look at these pathways for walking and exercise, perhaps, there will be a reassessment, with some of these footpaths made better again for people to walk on?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The reality is that social distancing will be with us for a long time and we need to create space for people to socially distance and keep safe.

I want, as I said about the work of the champion, to link with a lot of the work that has already taken place, so I am keen to have a discussion with Minister Hargey, for example, on public realm works that her Department is carrying out to see whether we can make the widening of footpaths a key element. That has to be the approach.

11.30 am

The Member is right that we have had to curtail severely a number of services that the Department provides. Grass cutting, for example, has been severely curtailed, as have a number of other services, because of budgetary pressures. We recognise the importance of these issues, and we try to do what we can. However, as always, we have to operate within financial restraints, and that is as frustrating for me as it is, I am sure, for the Member.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her statement. I am happy to learn of the focus on a green recovery and, in particular, the reallocation of road space, which I and other Greens called on her last time to support. I thank the Minister for her correspondence on that issue.

Given the focus on walking and cycling, will the Minister commit to not progressing any further the experimental traffic control scheme permitting taxis in bus lanes, instead of focusing on other measures to enhance the provision of public transport, cycle infrastructure and pedestrian priority?

Ms Mallon: We need to go up in a helicopter to take a holistic and comprehensive view of our public transport network. We need to look at the hierarchy and put walkers at the top and then have cyclists, riders and drivers. However, we must also recognise that, if we have a really good public transport system, it requires our buses, our trains and our taxi drivers, as I recognise that they too are an important part of it. The challenge, I suppose, is how we use the road space that we have to recognise that it is an integrated transport system, while being mindful of environmental improvements and benefits. It is an issue that I am aware of. I am very much focused on COVID-19 at present, but I know that it is an issue. I had started to engage on it just before the crisis hit, and it is certainly an issue that I will engage on further.

Mr Allister: Can I take the Minister back to the haulage sector? If the Executive are considering a support package for that sector, will the Minister deal with a rumour

that circulated in that sector over the weekend that the Executive are minded to limit such a package to haulage companies with 90 lorries or fewer? That, of course, would be devastating for a major employer such as McBurney Transport in my constituency. Can the Minister assure me that any package will be open to all, will be fair and will be proportionate?

Ms Mallon: That is always the outcome that we seek to achieve. The challenge here is that any forthcoming financial package funded by the British Government to some extent requires sign-off by Treasury. I assure the Member that the Executive have not had discussions about limiting financial support or the granular detail that he has spoken about, so I was surprised to read that online over the weekend.

I am clear that the haulage industry has a critical role to play. The make-up of our haulage industry means that many of those engaged in the service do not have huge reserves to dip in and out of, so they are at breaking point. What we are doing and will continue to do is make representations. As I say, I feel that we have successfully made the case to the Department for Transport. The matter now sits with the UK Treasury, and we will continue to press the case. We will continue to work with the haulage industry to provide the evidence that Treasury seeks. I am hopeful that we can see financial support going to our hauliers.

Mr Carroll: The Minister said that she would like to hear about issues concerning PPE and social distancing, and I welcome her statement and her comments to that effect. Workers in the Roads Service in Belfast have been in contact with my office with serious concerns about non-essential work that Roads Service staff in other regions are not being made to do during the crisis. They have raised concerns that they are unable to distance socially from the public while doing that work, putting themselves and, obviously, the public at risk. Worse, the protection that they are given does not prevent the spread of COVID-19. When they do emergency work, they are not being given proper PPE at all. I have written to the Minister's office about those issues, and the workers themselves have raised them, but, seemingly, nothing has been done. Can the Minister give a guarantee today that those workers will no longer be asked to carry out non-essential work and will be provided with adequate PPE when they have to do emergency work?

Ms Mallon: I have not seen the Member's correspondence. I do not know whether he has just sent it in, but it has not come up to me, so I am not aware of the detail of the case. It is clear that it needs to be essential work; as Minister, I have been clear on that. I know that there is a challenge. Constituents have told me that they have seen some of our staff out cleaning gullies and cannot understand why that is deemed to be essential works. It is essential works because we run the risk of flooding if we do not clear gullies. It is about the protection of homes.

I will ask officials to provide me with the Member's correspondence, and I will get in touch directly with him on it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. I thank her for coming to speak to the House.

School Enhancement Programme

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I wish to update the Assembly on the second call to the school enhancement programme (SEP2).

I launched a second call for applications to the school enhancement programme on 25 January 2017. The applications received by the closing date were assessed under the agreed protocol, and separate prioritised lists were created for primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools. The protocol indicated that those prioritised lists would be held open for two years. As the first tranche of projects was announced on 8 May 2018, the prioritised lists will expire on Friday, 8 May 2020. I am, therefore, announcing a final tranche of 16 projects to advance in design. The lists will then be closed, in accordance with the protocol.

Three tranches of projects have been announced to date, and 58 schools are currently being progressed under SEP2. Design teams have been appointed for 20 of those projects, and work is ongoing to develop detailed designs for those schools. The other projects are at earlier stages of scoping and design. However, the appointment of design teams for those projects is likely to be delayed due to the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.

The delivery teams in the Department of Education and the Education Authority are working to capacity to progress the projects. Therefore, it is likely that projects in the schools that I am announcing today will not be initiated before the 2021-22 financial year. Despite that, I consider that there is value in making a further announcement before the lists expire to ensure that a pipeline of SEP projects is maintained for the medium term. That will be welcome news for the 16 schools, the design teams and, ultimately, the construction industry, especially in the current difficult circumstances.

The 16 schools in today's announcement will benefit from a total estimated investment of £40 million to enhance their facilities and improve the teaching and learning environment for each school community. The list comprises 10 primary schools, four post-primary schools and two special schools. The primary schools, in alphabetical order, are as follows: Christian Brothers' Primary School, Armagh; Greenisland Primary School; Hart Memorial Primary School, Portadown; Kilbride Central Primary School, Doagh; Our Lady and St Patrick Primary School, Downpatrick; St Brigid's Primary School, Mayogall, Magherafelt; St Comgall's Primary School, Antrim; St Patrick's Primary School, The Meadow, Newry; St Peter's Primary School, Moortown; and Strandtown Primary School, Belfast. The post-primary schools are: Ashfield Boys' High School, Belfast; Belfast Royal Academy; Carrickfergus Grammar School; and Clounagh Junior High School, Portadown. The two special schools are Hill Croft School in Newtownabbey and Clifton School in Bangor.

SEP2 is a significant programme that will deliver much-needed capital investment in 74 schools across the estate: 43 primary schools, 19 post-primary schools and 12 special schools. Typical projects that are being progressed within the programme include the provision of new teaching blocks to accommodate additional pupils or to reduce the reliance on temporary accommodation

or the refurbishment of existing classrooms to address substandard or constrained teaching spaces.

SEP projects have an upper limit of £4 million, so it is important that the investment is focused on addressing the greatest need of each individual school. The delivery teams will consult extensively with each school to identify the deficiencies and agree the priorities for investment within the SEP funding envelope of £4 million.

While 74 schools will receive SEP funding, I am aware that many other schools across the diverse schools estate are in need of capital investment. Officials are continuing to undertake preparatory work in advance of an announcement of new major works projects to advance in design, and I hope to return to the Assembly to make that announcement in the coming months. The minor works programme will also continue to progress the highest priority schemes.

Improving the schools estate is one of my priorities, and, in the current, unprecedented and difficult times, I hope that this announcement will send a strong signal to the local construction industry that the Department of Education is planning for the future and is committed to supporting the local economy through the delivery of my Department's capital programme. My Department's capital programme aims to ensure that all our children and young people are educated in school facilities that are safe, secure and fit for purpose, enabling them to receive the quality education experience required to help them to fulfil their potential.

This announcement today represents another strand of the overall capital programme and, indeed, marks the last announcement of SEP2 projects. Over my term as Education Minister, I will review progress on the 74 announced projects, and, subject to satisfactory progress and available budget, I will consider whether there should be a third call for applications to SEP — that would be SEP3 — as part of the overall capital investment strategy.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for his statement. Again, I remind Members that the shorter and sharper we keep it, the more Members will get called.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his statement, which will be a much-needed boost to our education sector. I particularly welcome the investment in my constituency, with Strandtown Primary School and Ashfield Boys' High School, which are good examples of the scale of investment needed to replace mobile facilities and dining facilities in particular. It will be a boost to morale for our education sector, but one of the key concerns for our education sector at this moment is the outstanding matter of payment for substitute teachers. Will the Minister provide the Assembly with an update on that matter?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that a bit of latitude is being given, as this is an announcement on the school enhancement programme.

In respect of substitute teachers, we continue to work with the Department of Finance. As indicated, we want to get the best possible package, and, if that is to be achieved, it requires something beyond what is available in the Department of Education. There is ongoing work, and I appreciate the frustrations and concerns. We find ourselves in a difficult position. As far as I am aware, in the Republic of Ireland, no particular provision has been

given for casual substitute teachers, other than simply to say that, if there is a situation in which a school needs a substitute — it is the same as here — they can use a substitute. In England, the Department for Education is not directly involved in any payment, but, because a lot of the teachers work through agencies, the agency can furlough, and the same is true in Wales. That is not an option that is within the ambit of the Department of Education. In Scotland, there is provision. However, we should note that the levels of pay there for substitute teachers are massively less than what is available in Northern Ireland, to the extent that the overall bill for substitute teachers in Scotland is less than Northern Ireland despite the fact that they teach more than twice the number of children. That also needs to be borne in mind when we look at comparators, but there is ongoing work.

I would like to bring this to a conclusion as quickly as possible. The problem is that, if I were to bring it to a conclusion immediately without any assistance from outside, it would be a smaller package and a smaller level of support than it would be if assistance could be provided from beyond the Department.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: This is a gentle reminder that the Minister's statement is about the school enhancement programme, so questions should relate to the school enhancement programme.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House today and thank him for his ongoing dedication and hard work during the current crisis. I welcome the statement, as it is good news for the education sector. It is also good news, as he said, for the construction industry. I particularly welcome the announcement of the enhancement for Belfast Royal Academy and thank the Minister for taking time to visit the school and meet me and the principal, Hilary Woods, some months ago.

Given the announcement today and the undoubted demand across the education sector in Northern Ireland, will there be a third call for the school enhancement programme?

11.45 am

Mr Weir: I am aware of the Member's particular commitment to Belfast Royal Academy and, indeed, to the other schools in his constituency.

On a third call, there will, as I said, be a review of progress. To some extent we are in quite a fluid situation, and that can have a good side to it and a bad side to it. Education spend on capital is a mixture of minor works, SEP and major works, which means that there can be a level of movement between that side of it. We have, obviously, completed this bit, and there is ongoing work in relation to that. I want to make sure that the flow of projects is kept sufficient. It is unlikely that there will be a third call before 2022, but we will keep the issue under review and, indeed, periodically. For the last number of years, the school enhancement programme has worked reasonably well for schools across the board. Therefore, it is a tool to which I or my successors will want to bear in mind. It can deliver very effectively for schools.

Ms Mullan: Minister, I thank you for your statement. I welcome your update on the school enhancement programme. For the 16 successful schools and their

school communities, it will give a welcome boost to their morale at this time.

Minister, before the pandemic hit, I believe, the Department had nearly completed a round of capital applications. In your statement you say that you will return with that announcement in the coming months. Can you give us a clear indication of when that will be?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her comments. I do not have an exact time frame. I suspect that I will want to liaise with officials. I suspect that we are probably looking at an announcement in the autumn. Obviously, we have less than two months of the summer term to go, and where we are has got to be factored in. I know that the Executive, as a whole, are looking at how they can help the construction industry and profile capital. That said, major capital spend tends to take quite a long time; for example, if there was a capital announcement for a range of schools, it would be a number of years before they were in a position to progress. I hope to make that announcement as soon as possible, but I will liaise with officials on the timing, the detail and what is available within that.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for his statement, his ongoing engagement with Members throughout the crisis and the way in which he responds to us so openly. I follow on from what other Members have said in welcoming this enhancement programme, which will come as a huge benefit to the school estate. As we know, the school estate badly needs investment, and it has been long awaited. I welcome the fact that it is a priority for you and your confirmation of it.

Given that the school classroom has been replaced by remote learning from home, Minister, what are your thoughts on the figures for children who are engaging online? They are quite low and concerning. There are reasons for it. However, what is the Minister doing to ensure that no child falls through the gaps in the absence of the classroom in this crisis?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The statement is about the school enhancement programme. The Minister may want to respond to that, but he is under no obligation to.

Mr Weir: I will take it in the generosity of spirit of the question. In enhancing every experience in the school, obviously, we want to ensure that all children are given levels of access. There is ongoing work, and I know there will some degree of update tomorrow. One of the areas is working with the EA. There has been a level of misconception that, for example, although school IT equipment is compatible with C2k, it is not limited to what can happen in the school, and EA will clarify that with schools. There is an opportunity to use existing kit.

There is a wider context that will need to be looked at for the capital budget. Depending on how this rolls out over time, there may need to be a level of investment and procurement for kit, which, in the grand scheme of things, should not be overly expensive. Therefore, there may be an examination of whether there is any need for a small amount of reprofiling of the capital budget this year to provide that. I know that the Member is aware of that. What we are experiencing is less frequently a situation where, "There is nothing at all in the house"; it is the fact that you get pressure of competing demands for kit. There is an onus on schools to identify technical difficulties, because there are locations — the Member, being from

West Tyrone, will be well aware of this — where, with the best will in the world, you can provide all the kit that you want and, because of the issues around the roll-out of broadband, a piece of IT equipment will be of no benefit. Where there is a substitute situation, for instance, providing paper copies of things, that will be factored into remote learning. It is a work in progress, an ongoing issue.

Dr Aiken: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Kilbride Central Primary School and as the parent of my young children at that school.

I thank the Minister for the much-needed investment in all the 16 schools but, in particular, for the three in my constituency, Kilbride, St Comgall's and Hill Croft. Where possible, I would like him to commit to expediting the construction work on the schools, because it is vital for our construction sector and what we are trying to do.

Mr Weir: Obviously, in making the announcement, I had the Member very much in mind [*Laughter.*] In all seriousness, yes, the work will be ongoing. The next stage of the process is discussion between officials and the schools. Obviously, there will be a bit of delay because of the COVID situation. The school makes an assessment of its needs and is scored against that. In most cases, that is what happens, but, in all cases, when that discussion takes place, it is not necessarily what the school puts as its priorities that are considered objectively as such. A little work needs to go on there.

The Executive, as a whole — I am not breaching confidentiality — are looking to see how they can support the construction industry and align its priorities with the capital budget. They recognise, as well, the particular short-term pressures from a capital point of view. With this year's budget, there will be some level of impact because of the level of disruption that has taken place already. There will be ongoing disruption, as construction firms comply with social distancing regulations. We should realise that the announcement today will be something for the future. It should not be particularly impacted, other than the pipeline being slightly slowed in the short-term. As much as possible, we are looking at what can be done directly in Northern Ireland and at international examples to see whether there are any areas that can be expedited; for instance, issues around procurement that could be made easier. Across the Executive, we are all acutely aware, particularly in the education sector, of the extent to which the broad construction industry not only is a major employer in Northern Ireland but acts as an engine for overall growth, stimulating the economy. The Executive as a whole are acutely aware of that, and they want to respond positively.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you, Minister, for the statement. Perhaps you can clarify how the schools included in your speech were selected. I will push the boat out a little bit: Omagh High School is awaiting an enhancement programme for a new school on the campus site in Omagh. Maybe you can give us some indication of when that will commence.

Mr Weir: I am not aware of the exact details of the Omagh Academy issue. They say that all politics is local, and, when you get a school enhancement programme announcement, that is particularly the case.

As indicated, a major capital build clearly goes beyond SEPs, and there will be an announcement in the

forthcoming months. Those will be assessed against that. The Member asks about the process side of that. The process is fairly lengthy. A call was put out, effectively, to advance with design. It is judged against the protocol and the criteria, which, for example, deal with issues such as area planning, meeting unmet need and where it is essential to address significant and substandard accommodation. There is then what is called the “gateway check” to ensure that the school is sustainable. Those that pass that check — there were 165 applications — will also have had issues around split-site operations and the condition of their existing accommodation considered. Officials will then — this dates back two or three years — do an assessment in each of the three categories — primary, post-primary and special — and rank each of the schools. There is a scoring mechanism. The schools are scored individually and ranked within their category so that, if you like, a primary school is competing against other primary schools. As each tranche has been released, a combination of schools from each of the three categories have fulfilled part of that. Social issues also impact on the process, such as the number of children in a school who are on the SEN register. The number of pupils in a school who take free school meals will also impact on the broad level of assessment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have an incomplete list, so, if Members want to ask a question, please indicate that to me either by approaching the Table or rising in your place. I will then add you to the list and make sure that everyone is called.

Ms C Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. We are well aware of the additional pressures that the economy will face as a consequence of COVID-19, so announcements like this, as the Minister pointed out, are a positive signal. Given that the Department may need to calibrate its budget as the COVID-19 situation progresses, when will the Minister be able to give us an update on a timeline for work to begin and be completed on Strule shared education campus?

Mr Weir: It is important that the work on Strule happens as quickly as possible. I have signed off on a range of things in relation to that project and will get back to the Member with the details. There are particular time frames, given that the Strule project is tied in with Fresh Start money and that the longer the delay, the more likely it is that construction inflation will happen, which will impact on spend on the ground. This is the biggest education project undertaken in the history of the state, so there is a level of priority. There will be delays because of the COVID-19 situation, but I am happy to get back to the Member with the detail as soon as possible.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is there money in the budget to ensure that the projects happen?

Mr Weir: Yes. As I indicated on the cost, an SEP project is effectively a mid-range project that runs between a minimum of £0.5 million and a maximum of £4 million. There will then be a scoping exercise, and the Department will ensure that the agreed projects provide value for money. It should be remembered that there is an assumption of, broadly speaking, a capital budget moving forward. The timescales are such that, even at the design stage, it is doubtful whether anything will directly happen as a result of today’s announcement in this year’s budget. So, there will be a level of disruption from the COVID-19

situation, but there is an ongoing budget and there is an opportunity for variation between SEP projects, minor works and major capital works. Part of that is to ensure, then, that we have flow as we move forward. Anything that has been announced is likely to take time, but it can be guaranteed that it will happen and there will be, therefore, money in the budget for it.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the announcement, especially for the Christian Brothers’ Primary School in Armagh and St Patrick’s Primary School in the Meadow. When will there be boots on the ground commencing construction? Will the Minister also commit to ensuring that schools that were not successful in this tranche receive investment in the not-too-distant future?

12.00 noon

Mr Weir: On the first question, the aim is that those projects would be initiated in the 2021-22 financial year, with detailed design work probably taking place the following year. We are talking about, probably, four years before there will be boots on the ground for construction. There are other projects ahead of them in the pipeline. However, they will move as quickly as possible. Again, if additional capital resources are available, things can move quickly. This is, ultimately, about trying to give certainty to those schools. Completion will be a little way off in that particular case, but it will be quicker than a full capital build.

The Member mentioned other schools. The current assessment of bids under SEP effectively ended this week. Initially there were, I think, 59 in total, but that shrank to 58 as one withdrew to be part of a wider capital project, and there are 16 more today. Therefore, 74 schools are benefiting through the SEP. Other schools will be assessed when there is a call for a new SEP. However, some of those may be seeking a full capital build, and they would be part of that overall situation.

I suppose while it is the case that there is no guarantee of any school getting anything from a fresh call, the fact that schools have been getting improvements means the chances for other schools will increase also. There is a knock-on effect. While there is no bar on any school applying for a second SEP project — some may need it and may get it — in many cases that will mean that schools that were ahead of those on the list will, effectively, have moved out of the way, so that will provide greater opportunity.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his statement; there was welcome news for many schools. As you will know, Minister, it is well documented that to improve pupil and teachers’ mental health, the environment needs to be therapeutic. Whilst there is some good news for many schools, do you have any worries about any schools that have missed out in this tranche? Do you have any idea, as another Member mentioned, about the programme moving forward after this tranche?

Mr Weir: Look, along with a level of success for particular schools, there is always a level of disappointment for schools that do not get anything, and I appreciate that. There will be further opportunities through major capital build and future school enhancement programmes. One of the things to note is that anyone who visits schools, particularly those that were built over the past 10 or

15 years, will notice some of the impact on design that has been made, in part to try to create that positive environment. Some of it is about use of space and light, for instance. I think that incorporating some of that thinking can be quite useful.

Although there will be individual action taken in each school, for quite a number of the schools, there is a common factor, which is that they were built at a stage when classroom size was below that suggested in the current handbook. Part of this is about providing expanded classrooms and expanded space, which, from a design point of view, can create light and good feeling. There is much wider recognition within schools and society, as the Member is obviously acutely aware, of the need to tackle issues of mental health. If, albeit in a small way, school design can help as part of a broader, holistic process, I think that it is something that people will bear in mind when it comes to the detailed design work that goes into schools.

Mr Buckley: I join Members in welcoming the statement. It is indeed a pleasant experience in the House, given what we have been hearing in the past few months regarding COVID-19. I particularly welcome the two additions in my constituency, namely, the Hart Memorial Primary School and Clounagh Junior High School. As has been mentioned, this benefits not only parents, teachers and pupils but the wider school community and the construction industry, so it is indeed welcome news.

Does the Minister have any further detail on the bids from Hart Memorial Primary School and Clounagh Junior High School in my constituency and what they entailed?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member and I know that he has been assiduous in his support for those schools. At present, as indicated, schools outline what they see as their priorities. Therefore, there is a caveat to be added to anything that I say on the grounds that the next stage will be a meeting between departmental officials and the schools to scope out what needs to be done.

Hart Memorial Primary School lacks the required accommodation for a 14-class-based primary school. A number of its classrooms are undersized, there is no resource area, there is a lack of storage and there are traffic management issues. Those are what the school sees as its priorities. Clounagh Junior High School in Portadown is aiming to look at deficiencies with regard to the DE handbook. A lot of schools are in a similar situation; there are many issues with undersized classrooms. At the moment, Clounagh Junior High School does not have a sports hall or fitness suites. There is a lack of sports pitches and, again, it has traffic management and car parking issues. A lot of schools will also be looking at pupil and staff safety, so they will have to consider not just what work can be done to the school buildings but what needs to be done externally.

Mr Muir: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Priory Integrated College in Holywood. I thank the Minister for his statement and for his announcement in relation to Clifton Special School in Bangor. Can he give us a bit more detail on what progress has been made on special school area planning?

Mr Weir: I will come to the specific issue of Clifton Special School in a moment. The Member will be aware that the Priory Integrated College project is one of those that is moving ahead under Fresh Start. Things may be moving a

little slower because of the COVID-19 situation, but that is guaranteed.

Broadly, there has been a level of investment in special schools. Although Clifton Special School is one of the newer special schools in Northern Ireland, the uptake of places has increased significantly in recent years. Again, Clifton Special School has identified deficiencies according to the building handbook; for instance, it has undersized classrooms and it has issues with its library. There are inadequate toilet facilities and there is a lack of mobility bays and storage for heavy equipment. It also has traffic management issues and a lack of play facilities.

Special schools have particular challenges, which is why there has always been a three-stage division of SEPs between primary, post-primary and special schools. Different levels of assessment are required at each level. As part of the process, while Clifton Special School has identified its key priorities, a sequence of work will go on between officials and representatives of the school to scope out what needs to be done. That will be agreed, and the project will move to the design stage.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the Minister's statement and the inclusion of moneys for Our Lady and St Patrick Primary School in Downpatrick. I hope that it is a good precursor to, maybe, moneys for a full rebuild of that merged school, which will help to address the lack of facilities and deal with the terrible traffic issues in Edward Street outside the school.

Following on from the previous question, will the Minister give some comfort to those special schools that have limited capacity? Many of them have a considerable list of pupils who need to get entry to them, but they do not have the additional facilities. Will it be possible to have a school enhancement programme for the special schools sector to increase its capacity?

Mr Weir: As I indicated in my previous answer, there is a separate section of the school enhancement programme for special schools in order to address their particular needs. As with all things, if actions can be taken — there is a differentiation here — where a school has an SEP, that means that, effectively, it will not get a full rebuild. To some extent, it is an either/or situation. In the meantime, however, it does not disqualify a school from carrying on with minor works where they are required or where particular individual actions are required to facilitate them.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for the announcement and the strong signal that it is of his commitment to the educational environment of our children. As you would expect, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am particularly delighted to hear the announcement for Strandtown Primary School and Ashfield Boys' High School, which are richly deserving of the programme and have worked extremely hard to get it. Strandtown school is unique in Northern Ireland, and Ashfield Boys' is always oversubscribed and is an extremely popular school in my constituency. The announcement will make an enormous difference to those schools and their pupils.

I note that the Minister mentioned a forthcoming announcement about major works. Is he in a position, at this stage, to outline how that scheme will differ from this one and potential differences in the criteria?

Mr Weir: The detail on that has still to be brought to a point of fruition. The two principal differences are, first, on the grounds of what constitutes major works. In the system, things are graded into three categories. Anything below £0.5 million will be counted as minor works, and that is particularly driven by health and safety issues. A project in the school enhancement programme is projected to be between a minimum of £0.5 million and £4 million. The other principal difference between the school enhancement programme and major works is that a project in the school enhancement programme is always a change to the school on its existing site. It might be, as mentioned in a number of the cases, the rebuild of some classrooms or the provision of additional classrooms to replace temporary facilities. It may be, as we have seen in the past, that a post-primary school gets a science block, a sports hall or something of that nature.

Essentially, for anything to be major works, it is required to be, at a minimum, above £4 million. Quite often, particularly in post-primary schools, that could stretch to £20/25/30 million; it can be quite large. It will take a lot longer, because it is entirely a new build, and a site search will be part of the process. That will apply, for example, in a number of the Fresh Start cases. Part of that will be an examination of what land is available and a range of options, and then there will be a business case. Even if the option of doing it on the current site exists, there has to be consideration of other locations, and it may well be that the school, in doing major works, will have to move to a different location or premises. That, in and of itself — the scale and the fact that that adds a layer of complexity and time — means that, generally speaking, a major works project is not only much more substantial in terms of money but will, quite often, tend to take considerably longer than an SEP one. There may be a certain level of disruption for SEP projects due to COVID, and we fitted in as many as we could, but, generally speaking, they will be delivered more quickly than would be the case for a major capital build.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Any Member who has not asked a question and wishes to do so should indicate that, please, and I will make sure that they get to ask their question.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement and the announcement of much-needed investment and, in particular, for the commitment for Clifton Special School in Bangor. As the Minister will be aware, there are a number of schools in Northern Ireland, and specifically in north Down, with outstanding needs. Will he confirm that minor works will not be affected by this SEP and outline how he intends to address the issue of minor works to enhance schools?

Mr Weir: There is always a flow between minor works and other works. I indicated that we are looking at a timescale of design teams starting to look at some of the issues within about a year. Certainly, there is no immediate impact. Indeed, consistently, over the last number of years, there has been a flow between the major capital works, the SEP projects and the minor works. Depending on circumstances, there may well be movements between budgets. Some of that will be on the basis of how much can be delivered in some of the major works and the knock-on that quite often happens. It is undoubtedly the case that, because they tend to be more agile in nature,

minor works can sometimes fill a void, when some of the major works are not able to progress as quickly as possible.

Obviously, again, there was a minor works call a considerable time ago. The volume of minor works identified was massively more than could be met.

12.15 pm

The other thing with minor works, as a number of Members will be aware, is that, to some extent, there is an analogy with the Housing Executive list. You can be in a particular place on the list, but if something is then identified as an emergency situation — particularly a health and safety issue — which was not previously part of the call but needs to be dealt with urgently, then that urgency may supersede the list. There is a continual flow of minor works. Allied to that, although it is not a capital issue, is school maintenance. To some extent, if maintenance can take place, it can obviate the need for particular capital actions to be taken. I would not say that there is blurring of the lines, but there is a level of interaction between minor works and maintenance as well.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. If Members will take 60 seconds to allow the Ministers to change over, we will then move on to the next item of business. Just take your ease for a minute or so.

Executive Committee Business

Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): I beg to move

That the draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

Mr Lyons: The draft order before the House today forms part of the legislative process that is required to enable the next census. The census is the largest statistical exercise undertaken by government and is the most important source of information on the size and nature of our population. Central and local government, the health and education sectors, the academic community, businesses, professional organisations and the voluntary sector all need the reliable information on people and households that they get from the census. Billions of pounds of public money is allocated each year using census data. The data is also used to help plan public services in education, health and a host of other areas. The census provides the main source of comparable statistics for small areas and small population groups which are consistent across Northern Ireland, with the rest of the UK and across the island of Ireland.

For the first time, it is planned that the census will be carried out primarily online. That will make it easier for the majority of our population to fill in their returns. Around 80% of households will receive an initial invitation to take part online, with the remainder receiving a paper questionnaire. However, those households can also choose to take part online if they wish. Anyone who does not receive a paper questionnaire will be able to request one via a dedicated call centre. After census day, paper questionnaires will also be sent out to all households that have not yet made their return.

The primary legislation that provides for the taking of a census is the Census (Northern Ireland) Act 1969. This allows the First Minister and deputy First Minister to order that a census of population be taken. The order prescribes the date on which the next census is to be taken, the persons with respect to whom census returns are to be made, the persons required to make those returns, and the questions in each census return.

The order proposes that the next census be held on 21 March 2021, just under a year from now. A variety of factors influenced the choosing of the date, including the tradition of the census being conducted at 10-yearly intervals; the desire to maximise the number of people who will be present at their own home on or around census night; the desire to avoid elections, which could cause confusion for the public; and ensuring the health and safety of census field staff, particularly through there being enough daylight hours for them to undertake the completion of field duties.

Locally, the census is conducted in partnership with the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which runs the census in England and Wales. The date chosen therefore aligns Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK. That joint working gives rise to efficiency savings and allows publicity

initiatives to be optimised. Joint working also reduces risk and the likelihood of public messages being confused.

A census is also planned for the Republic of Ireland in 2021 but on the slightly later date of Sunday 18 April. Officials in the census office in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) already work closely with colleagues in the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that detailed statistics for the island of Ireland can be produced. Going forward, we will keep the timing of the census under review. If, because of coronavirus or, indeed, any other reason, a census cannot be taken, further legislation will be brought before the Assembly to amend the plans laid out here.

Secondly, the order details who is to be included in the census and who is responsible for making the return. The order prescribes that every individual who is usually resident at an address must be included in the census return. A subset of information will also be collected on visitors staying at an address on census night. That helps ensure that nobody is missed and that all are counted at their place of residence. To that end, every household and communal establishment will receive a census questionnaire, and special arrangements will also be in place to ensure that members of the Traveller community and people who are sleeping rough are included.

It will be the responsibility of householders to ensure that their census questionnaire is completed and returned. In communal establishments, the manager or person in charge will be responsible for completing an establishment-level census questionnaire and ensuring that individual questionnaires are completed for all usual residents of the establishment. The public will be able to get assistance with the completion of their questionnaire should that prove necessary. Special arrangements will be put in place to support vulnerable groups to ensure that the census is equally accessible to all.

The third aspect of the order relates to the questions to be included in the census return. The 2021 census consultation process began after the previous census. Two formal public consultations were held, in 2015 and 2018. To create the proposals, discussions were also held with experts from Departments and the main census users in the academic, business, statutory and voluntary sectors. That all led to the detailed proposals paper that was published in April 2019. Subsequently, public engagement events were held to explain and discuss the proposals. Finally, the Executive endorsed the proposals in March of this year.

The detailed programme of work to develop, test and evaluate the topics has also included a large-scale census rehearsal in autumn 2019. Such activities have helped ensure that the census will deliver consistent, high-quality information to meet user needs on topics that are acceptable. All of that work has drawn on the valuable experience and insight gained through previous censuses. The questions, or particulars, on census returns are outlined in schedule 2 to the draft order. Although most of the particulars have already been included in previous censuses, the consultation suggested the need to collect additional information on the nature of our population.

I draw Members' attention to a number of new topics. There will be an extension to the question on long-term

health conditions to include an option on autism and Asperger's syndrome. There will be a new household-level question on whether solar panels, wind turbines or other forms of renewable energy are used in the household. Lastly, following detailed public engagement, there will be an individual question for adults on sexual orientation. To address privacy concerns, and given that the census is statutory, there will be no penalty if members of the public do not answer this question.

A key principle was that the 2021 census should be no longer, in terms of the number of questions, than the 2011 census, and this has been achieved. While some topics are excluded because they could have had a negative impact on the census, alternative data sources such as social surveys and administrative data can be used instead. The topics proposed for inclusion strike the proper balance between meeting the requirements of census users and managing the burden on the public.

I emphasise to Members that the information provided by the public will be treated in the utmost confidence. The census office has a track record, and it will make data security and confidentiality its highest priority. The delivery, return and processing of each questionnaire will be tracked at key stages to ensure that every one is accounted for. All arrangements for handling census information were the subject of an independent security review, which has been published. All temporary field staff who help to undertake the enumeration process are civil servants and will be security vetted by Access NI. All staff working on the census will also be required to sign a confidentiality declaration to confirm their understanding of and commitment to the legal confidentiality undertakings. Disclosure of personal census information is a criminal offence. Names and addresses are retained purely for census purposes and will be removed from the information that is used to produce the aggregate outputs. Personal census information is kept secure and closed to public inspection. The finalised census data set will be registered under the Data Protection Act 2018.

Further information on the detailed operational aspects of the 2021 census, including the appointment of field staff and the creation of enumeration districts, will be brought forward through the planned census regulations. I commend this draft order to the Assembly.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I welcome the statement. I speak on behalf of the Committee, which, at its meeting on 25 March, considered a proposal for a statutory rule that directed that a census be held in 2021 and outlined, in broad terms, its content and coverage.

As already outlined, the Department of Finance has central authority for the conduct of the census, but, first, the First Minister and deputy First Minister must direct that the census take place. Given the involvement of the Department of Finance, the Committee for Finance considered the policy implications of the proposal at its meeting on 18 March. It wrote to the Committee for the Executive Office advising that it had no objections to the rule.

The draft statutory rule was laid on 9 April and considered by the Committee for the Executive Office at its meeting on 22 April. At the time of that consideration, the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not reported her findings on the technical elements of the rule. However, the Committee

recommended that, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules's report, the draft rule be approved by the Assembly. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has now reported on the statutory rule and raised no issues. Therefore, the Committee's recommendation that the draft rule be approved stands.

Speaking as an MLA, I welcome the inclusion of some of the population who were previously excluded, especially those from the LGBT community. I also welcome that the issue of a penalty for those not answering questions on gender identity is addressed. The ability of people to exercise their identity is essential, and this inclusion is very welcome. As someone from the sector said:

"If you don't count, you don't count."

I also welcome the fact that the new process can be completed online.

It is 2020, and, as many people nowadays wholly use technology and online methods to conduct their business, even though this is a voluntary option, it is very welcome that the opportunity is there.

12.30 pm

I also wish to recognise and welcome the fact that extensive stakeholder engagement took place. It is absolutely critical that such engagement continues and that the Executive reach out to as many people who are impacted by the new regulations as possible to hear their voice and have that voice included in the outcomes. We welcome these census regulations.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I remind Members that I have the following names on my list: Mr Aiken, Mr Sheehan, Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair and Mr Allister. If your name is not there and you wish to participate in this discussion, please rise or try to catch my eye and I will add you to the list.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): The Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 is made under powers conferred by the Census Act, which specifies that the First Minister and deputy First Minister must direct the censuses taken. The Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office has summarised the anomaly that resulted in the scrutiny of the legislation falling on two Statutory Committees. The Committee for Finance was asked to scrutinise the general policy proposals and then write to the Committee for the Executive Office to advise whether it was content. It then fell to the latter to consider the draft order.

The Committee for Finance received oral evidence from the register general on the statutory rule on 18 March 2020 at the SL1 stage. Members were informed that the legislation would establish the date of census, the area to be covered, the persons who have to complete returns, the persons who should be included in those returns and the questions that should be asked. It also proposed that the census should be, as has already been briefed, held on 21 March. Obviously, that will be subject to any potential COVID restrictions that may then occur.

Members then questioned officials and received assurances on the steps that had been taken to ensure the accuracy of the register on which the census is based. The census will include a number of new topics, including

a household question on renewable heat systems, an adult question on apprenticeships completed and an adult question on sexual orientation, which will not be compulsory. Some questions have been omitted from the 2011 census where there are other sources of data available.

Officials outlined the extensive consultation that has taken place since 2014 on the questions to be asked. That included a dry run of the census in west Fermanagh, Belfast and Craigavon, which was to ensure consistency of data and to test systems and services. The dry run also included an online census to ensure adequacy of connectivity in rural and border regions. In response to a question from the Committee, officials revealed that, in the dry run, two thirds of households completed the census online, and that, although the percentage was higher in Belfast, more than 50% of households in west Fermanagh completed the census online. Obviously, that was those who managed to find that their broadband worked.

Having considered the oral evidence from the register general, the Committee for Finance was content with the policy implications of the legislation.

Mr Sheehan: Census is of great importance in gathering the necessary information to understand the needs of the population living in this part of the island. Understanding need is vital to us as political representatives in developing policy and in planning and delivering public services for society. The North of Ireland is becoming more and more diverse, and, as a society, it is important to understand and respond to the changing needs of the whole community. How the census is conducted and the information that it seeks to gather indicates just how diverse our society has become. I welcome the fact that translated booklets on how to complete the census will be provided in many different languages. Of course, the option to complete the census in Irish, as well as Ulster Scots, is an important recognition of the communities who live and work through their own language.

I welcome the inclusion of a number of new questions in the census. The question on long-term health conditions will now include an option on autism and Asperger's syndrome, allowing the needs of those with autism and Asperger's syndrome to be better identified and to provide more planned support and interventions. The need to establish the uptake of renewable energy sources is also helpful in our contributions to addressing the existential climate crisis facing the planet. I also welcome the question for adults on sexual orientation. That question, unlike others, will not be mandatory, but it will help to improve the visibility, recognition and rights of those in our society who have suffered so much neglect, discrimination and prejudice in the past.

Census 2021 will not just be important for measuring the change that has already occurred, but as a benchmark for the change that we will see in the decade ahead. We are facing significant changes in the immediate and short term, in the context of Brexit, the global pandemic that is COVID-19, and the global climate crisis, all of which pose serious risks and challenges that will change society. Significantly, it is getting increasingly difficult to ignore the reality that those challenges require all-Ireland solutions and approaches. Whether health, economic or environmental, these crises will impact everyone on this island and they are best addressed together. It

is important, therefore, that NISRA works closely with colleagues in the South in the Central Statistics Office to ensure that detailed statistics for the island of Ireland can be produced as the outworking of each census, on either side of the border, in 2021.

Ms Armstrong: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the independent collection of data through the census. However, and I have to say this to the junior Minister and the Finance Minister, whom I see in the Chamber, I have reasonable concerns about this order.

The proposed census contains a question that is outdated and insulting to many people who do not wish to be identified by their religious background. Mr Sheehan rightly talked about a diverse society, and it looks as if this census is doing that, but, unfortunately, it is a bit backward looking as well. As the Chair of the Committee mentioned, basically, if you are not in the census, you do not count. We are allowing a census to go through in which you have to note down the perceived religion that you were brought up in. So, in this census, the diverse society counts only if you are Catholic or Protestant. The unwillingness to remove that outdated question means that the census in 2021 will deliver information that perpetuates a Catholic or Protestant headcount; data that is not relevant and that is quite disrespectful to the growing number of people who no longer wish to be defined by a specific religion or who do not have a religion.

I want it put on record that if we are considering Northern Ireland only in terms of Catholics or Protestants, or as a special case, how can we move forward in our peace process to what should be a normal future? The outdated language and the use of a question about the religious body that people were brought up in is not helpful in planning for a truly shared and inclusive society and future.

The Northern Ireland census asks, under the demographic particular of question 17, for the:

Religion, religious denomination or body belonged to, or if none (selecting all that apply).

It then goes on to ask:

For those indicating none to the above;

Religion, religious denomination or body brought up in, or if none (selecting all that apply).

Why ask that question? The 2021 census and the Executive Office are asking people who are not involved in a religion to be defined by that religion, and to state the religion that they may have been perceived to have been brought up in or that their grandparents were brought up in. That is quite insulting and it does not recognise religious diversity. It is all religions, and none, that we are supposed to be respecting. It is like the old thing that I grew up with, "Aye, but are you a Catholic Jew or a Protestant Muslim?". It is ridiculous. Is this the way that the Executive Office still considers Northern Ireland? Instead of using the factual data that is already provided through the question, "What religion do you belong to?", the question undermines a respondent who chooses to answer no by requiring them to confirm the religion that they were brought up in. What use is that data?

Instead of looking forward, this census will again collate data that is irrelevant. Surely the priority in our diverse

society is to ensure that we capture data to measure equality for all, not just those who have defined themselves as Catholic or Protestant. Persisting in asking a population to define itself in this way means that society here will always be held back by people who are determined only to recognise division and not the inclusive nature of our much more diverse society.

I am extremely concerned by the second religion question. When I met NISRA as part of the ongoing consultation, it confirmed that the question would be optional. Really? It is not in the order as being optional. Under 3.9 of the explanatory notes, it confirms that the question on sexual orientation:

“will have no penalty for non-response.”

I was told that there was no penalty for not answering the second religion question, so I am going to ask the junior Minister whether he can confirm when summarising that the public will not be fined if they choose not to answer that irrelevant question. If you do not have a legal obligation to answer the second religion question, why is it asked and deemed necessary?

Just when I mention not having to answer that question, when I met NISRA and it mentioned to me how the question was not going to be compulsory, I asked it to ensure that a pop-up would appear when people get to that question — question 17 — to explain to them that they do not have to answer it, and NISRA absolutely refused to consider that. If the census is going online, why not make it easier for people to use and enable pop-ups that can give instructions? I was told, “No. People have to have a printed copy sitting beside them to refer to for every question that they answer”. Why? Why not use technology to let the public know that they can ignore that question and will not face a fine? The census places unreasonable respondent burden on the person. Respondents would have to print and keep referring to the completion guidance just to know that they do not have to answer that question. That is not fair.

I could understand the refusal if there were a financial reason for not using the technology to its full extent. Adding a pop-up, I accept, could cost money. However, NISRA already confirmed for me that there is no cost to removing the second religion question from the system. That means that there is no financial concern with making a proactive and positive change.

The second religion question is not asked in England and Wales. Scotland decided that 2011 would be the last time that it would ever be asked because when they examined it, they saw that there was the same limited interest in looking backwards to what someone once was or could be perceived to have been. The public acceptability of the question has gone. The census should be there to provide evidence about who our population is, not what it was 30, 40 or 50 years ago. In the South, the Irish census tested different versions of their religion question. In the 2016 census, they found that the people who selected no religion represented the second-biggest group. They changed how they asked the question and have come up with, “Do you have a religion?” rather than, “Do you belong to a religion?” People then respond yes or no. If you say no, you move onto the next question. You are not then asked, “What religion were you brought up in?” If you mark yes, you say what religion you are. They decided to remove the second religion question as it was less about

religion and more about finding out the cultural background of the person. It was decided that it was not correct to use the data in that way, and they, rightly, removed it.

When statisticians here use the information gleaned from the religion question, they mash together the factual answer to the question, “What religion do you belong to?” with the answer to the second religion question, which is a presumption that is based on background. When a person answers a census question, they are asked to do so honestly, so why, then, ignore the answer that they have given honestly to the question of the religion that they belong to by forcing those who say none to say what community background they were brought up in? Unfortunately, it is the same with the Equality Commission, which is still using data that is provided by employers, who are told by law to guess someone’s religious background rather than use the facts that the employee has provided.

As background, public bodies and businesses are required to monitor equality of employment under the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. Those duties are part of the Good Friday Agreement. As part of the monitoring process, employees and job applicants are asked to answer a question on a monitoring form stating whether they are part of the Catholic or Protestant community or neither. Sadly, the Equality Commission, the equality regulator, supports the production of religion and religious upbringing census outputs to help inform whether an affirmative action programme is needed, even though it has already written to signify that race should be considered in that employment piece. There is no such affirmative action being considered for people who, like me, have disabilities, and gender, age and race are not considered. All we are doing is using this information on religion. The system is enabling an unfair society because the census is asking backward-facing questions.

In consultations for the 2021 census, there appears to have been support for maintaining the census as was, but, given that so few actually responded, I find it difficult to understand why the then Ministers accepted the results: 1,400 consultations were sent out and 50 were received back.

12.45 pm

I think that keeping the second religious question in the 2021 census is a very flawed measurement; it is one that is outdated and backward. What the census is doing is saying that we must consider you as you have always been with regard to what you once were and where you once lived — no such thing as a shared society.

The Education Authority uses the census to track demographic shifts and patterns, but the school census should be able to provide that information. The root-and-branch reform of our education system is defined in ‘New Decade, New Approach’ as child in education centred and not along the lines of segregation. Therefore, why when planning for a shared future, would any Minister allow outdated and backward-looking information to guide them? We should be looking to build local inclusive schools that work for the whole community. We should stop enabling division by using presumptions that no other country in the British Isles recognises as being fit for purpose.

I have not tabled an amendment to the order because I was told that it was a waste of my breath to even try, “The

deal is done; they are the questions that are being asked. Go away, Kellie". I am saying to the Executive Office that it has the last chance to bring this census up to date by removing an unnecessary question that harks back to a segregated past that we are all working so hard to move on from. Junior Ministers, I ask you to consider what I have said. Do you think that it is right to not accept what people have said about their faith, or no faith? Should we not actually be accepting their honesty? Thank you.

Mr Blair: My colleague has most ably just reflected on the difficulties for many of us on the religious question in the census 2021 questionnaire. I fully concur with her comments regarding that matter and I want to take the opportunity to make clear my feelings.

In many ways, you could say that this is a personal comment and I think that is understandable in the circumstances because, just like everyone else in the House, and the many millions outside of it, I am an individual. Therefore, I am entitled to decide whether I have a religion or not and I should also be able to decide whether or not I leave it up to others to decide that for me. I should never be put in a position where I am expected to declare the expected perception of others on an identity that I do not believe that I have. However, I know that as soon as I say that that I am going beyond the personal, because I know, and it has been widely analysed and reported, that a substantial and growing number of people in Northern Ireland take that position and make that choice. The reality is that some of us consciously decide not to be defined in that way. You might expect that we would have the right to do so. The core issue here is the right to be who we are irrespective of perceptions. I hope that the Ministers present will take that on board when they are making their reflections at a later stage.

To go further on the issue of identity, and in staying on the theme of being who we are and allowing others to do likewise, I will address the inclusion in this census of a question relating to sexual orientation. I am perfectly happy that the question is there, although I am less happy that it will be posed as an optional question, rather than a compulsory one with a very clear option of, "prefer not to say".

In the interests of gathering full, or as full as possible, data, we should proactively seek information that is truly reflective of our entire community. That is vital in the need to shape policy that is representative and meets the needs of all in society, especially in trying to address bias, discrimination and hate crime. It is also important that any question on sexual orientation allows the respondent to identify who they are beyond the rigid categories of gay, bi or straight. I hope that too will be addressed in the reflections made by Ministers.

Even at this stage, I am hopeful that the Ministers can reflect on those points and take action in the interests of true fairness and representativeness.

Mr Allister: I cannot and will not take part in a debate on the census without reflecting on the fact that, in a past census, one of the most brutal and callous acts of the Provisional IRA was the cold-blooded murder of a census collector, Mrs Joanne Mathers, as she did her public duty in the city of Londonderry. In the annals of all murders, that murder stands out for its particular cruelty and utter lack of anything that could ever be dressed up as justification. Of course, it came at a time when the republican movement

sought to thwart the taking of a census. It went to the lengths of that brutal murder, and then, of course, tried to cover it up and deny that it was a murder by the Provisional IRA. Of course, at that time, the commander of the IRA in that city was, we are told, one Martin McGuinness, who, sadly, took to his grave such knowledge as he had of that fiendish murder. I do not think that any of us, when we hear the word "census", should do other than reflect upon the awfulness, cruelty and vileness of that hideous murder.

The junior Minister who will respond to the debate has always been very upfront as a propagandist for the republican movement, both in his speeches and in his writings. I trust that he will take the opportunity, without weasel words, to apologise unambiguously, on behalf of the republican movement, for that hideous murder. There must be no more equivocation but a facing up to the fact that it was wrong in all its dimensions and robbed a family of a young mother who was going about a public duty. I will listen, more in hope, maybe, than in expectation, for the junior Minister to step up to the plate on behalf of his republican movement and face the facts of that awful, cruel murder.

I will turn to the content of the census order. When he introduced the order, the other junior Minister underscored the significance and importance of the census in obtaining reliable information, which is then utilised to shape Government policy and funding. It is fundamental to the whole process of governing. Given its fundamental nature, therefore, it is critical that it is made foolproof in order to be reliable. We need to know that the information that is given by the population is accurate, yet I heard nothing from the junior Minister about how the information will be checked for its accuracy or how that will be made foolproof.

I do not think that any of us in the Chamber should be so naïve as to think that there are not people out there with various agendas who are willing to give their pet cause a leg-up in a census, particularly in circumstances where they can now do it online and no one will come to collect the information.

I will take the issue of language fluency. We all know that, in this Province, there is a politically-driven campaign to big-up the needs of the Irish language sector. We are going to have a census that asks a question about capacity in Irish, for example, fluency, ability to understand, ability to write and ability to speak. What is in the process to stop anyone who is so minded — whose knowledge of Irish might be no greater than Gregory Campbell's — to write on the census form that they are fluent in Irish and that they can speak it, understand it and write it, for the purpose of demonstrating a phantom rise in the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland. There is nothing in this census which protects against that. I, for one, am not foolish enough to think that that would not happen, given the political nature of the campaign that drives much of that contention.

I challenge the Ministers on what protections are in place, or will be put in place, to proof the answers that are given. I see nothing in the legislation that adequately provides for that. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that is a particular flaw in this matter.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Can I ask the Member to resume his seat, briefly?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is now 12.57 pm and the Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm. Therefore, I propose by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Mr Allister resuming his contribution.

Mr Allister: I can conclude very quickly. I have two issues. One is that pertaining to the unrequited apology, unfulfilled apology, of Sinn Féin for the murder of a census worker. The other is how we are going to check against abuse of this census process. I would like to hear the junior Minister step up to the plate on both issues.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I apologise to the Member for interrupting. I did not realise that he was coming to his conclusion.

The Business Committee are meeting at 1.00 pm. The next item of business, when we return, will be junior Minister Kearney making his winding-up speech on the motion.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

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2.01 pm

Assembly Business

Mr John Dallat MLA

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, before we resume our business this afternoon, some of you will be aware of the sad news that our colleague John Dallat sadly passed away this morning. I served alongside John as a Member of the Assembly from 1998 and while he was a Deputy Speaker. I know that I speak for all Members when I say that he will be sorely missed. The Speaker will put arrangements in place for formal tributes to be paid to John at the start of our sitting next week. However, for today, let me express our condolences to John's wife Anne, his children Helena, Ronan and Diarmuid, and his eight grandchildren. They are in our thoughts and prayers today.

Executive Committee Business

Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Debate resumed on motion:

That the draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):

Gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhaltaí sin a chuidigh le díospóireacht an lae inniu ar an dréacht-Ordú Daonáirimh, agus cuirim fáilte roimh a gcuid tuairimí agus barúlacha. I thank the Members who contributed to today's debate on the draft Census Order and welcome their comments.

The census is subject to many competing demands. The consultations identified more demands per census question than it would be possible to accommodate in a questionnaire that households could reasonably be expected to complete. In coming to a final selection of questions, some difficult decisions had to be made. Those decisions balanced the requirements for information with the burden placed on the public. The topics outlined in schedule 2 to the order are judged to have the greatest demonstrated need, not to be available from other sources, not to place an excessive burden on the public and to be obtained through easy-to-answer questions.

Ba mhaith liom léirmheas a dhéanamh ar an díospóireacht anois. I will now deal with a number of the observations and contributions that Members made during today's debate and do my best to respond to them as fully as possible.

Colin McGrath, Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office, noted that the Committee approved the regulations. He welcomed the fact that the census reflects the diversity of our society and made the telling point that, sadly, if you do not count, you do not count. He commended the level of stakeholder engagement as a positive development.

Steve Aiken, Chair of the Finance Committee, noted the anomaly that the order was processed between his Committee and that of the Executive Office, and he outlined the scrutiny process that was undertaken by his Committee. He reflected on the dry-run process undertaken by the census office and on the fact that that extended to urban and rural areas. He noted that 50% of recipients in Fermanagh responded online to the dry run, and he advised that he and his Committee were content for the regulations to proceed.

Pat Sheehan underscored the importance of the census. He said that it took account of diversity in society. He welcomed the facility to respond in Gaeilge and Ulster Scots and endorsed the additional question to include those in society with autism and Asperger's syndrome — an issue very close to my heart. I, too, am delighted to see that those members of our community will be properly recognised and identified as we move forward in our census data. Pat Sheehan also welcomed the addition of the question on sexual orientation. He encouraged closer collaboration between NISRA and the Central Statistics Office in the South as another practical way to develop closer all-island working.

Kellie Armstrong made a forceful argument that the inclusion of questions on religious and community

background is backward-looking, outmoded and counter to a shared society. The Member expressed serious concern at the second question that is posed. She feels that public acceptability for the inclusion of such questions in our census has disappeared. Kellie Armstrong asked whether citizens would be fined for not answering those questions and whether it was obligatory to answer them. I assure Kellie Armstrong and the House that failure to answer those questions carries no penalties. The two religion questions were first included in the 2001 census following the creation of new legal obligations under the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998, which the Member mentioned. That legislation requires employers to establish the community background of their employees and, in turn, for that to be compared with the eligible population. The religion and community background questions, therefore, produce a composite census output based on the answers to the two religion questions that is essential for those purposes. The public consultation also identified continued support for the questions to be included from Departments and the Equality Commission. However, I assert and assure the Member that citizens are not required to answer the questions. The online system will allow you to bypass the question, and citizens will be given advance notice by the Registrar General to that effect in the lead-up to the census.

John Blair agreed with Kellie Armstrong that it is unfair to have to define oneself according to a religious or community background. He asked why identifying sexual orientation was optional and not compulsory. He reflected a concern that there is a lack of consideration of the social reality of our very diverse LGBTQ community and said that that must be recognised in wider society. I agree with the Member that the identity rights of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters should be affirmed and can confirm that it is acceptable and is an available option for those to write their sexual orientation over and above a sexual identity of gay, lesbian, bisexual and so on.

Jim Allister began by speaking of the tragic killing of the census enumerator Ms Joanne Mathers in 1981. That was indeed a terrible act that caused deep hurt and suffering to her family and scarred our society. Her death is another heart-wrenching reason that it is so important to ensure that our peace process guarantees a better future for us all and for all of our children. As a Minister and a public representative, I assure the House that I am absolutely committed to securing a better, shared future for everyone in our society.

The Member also questioned the accuracy of the census.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kearney: No, Mr Allister, I will not give way.

Ag tionú ar an cheist i dtaobh na Gaeilge de, proficiency in Irish has been a census question since 1981. A question is also included in the 2021 census that determines the frequency of the use of the Irish language. This question has, in fact, been fully tested in voluntary household surveys run by NISRA, and the figures are accurate. NISRA will, in turn, run a follow-up survey to assess and test the accuracy of the census. I mo mheas féin, a LeasCheann Comhairle, léiríonn an daonáireamh, leis na blianta anuas, go bhfuil líofacht na Gaeilge ag gabháil ó neart go neart sa tsochaí seo. I am delighted that our society is becoming increasingly culturally diverse and that

we hear many other languages spoken in this society here in this region above and beyond the use of Gaeilge and Ulster Scots.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their interest in the draft census order and for contributing to the debate. Tá mé fíor-shásta go soláthróidh tosú an ordaithe seo bunchloch reachtach don daonáireamh a bhéas ann sa bhliain 2021. I am satisfied that the commencement of the order will provide the legislative foundation for a successful census in 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Before I move the order, I join others in expressing my sadness to learn of the death of John Dallat. I worked with him for many years in the House and express my condolences to his family, friends and party colleagues at this very sad time.

I beg to move

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Murphy: This order is brought forward annually, and it stems from the Executive's Budget for the 2020-21 year, which was originally brought to the Assembly on 31 March 2020. The order has been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the crisis, I introduced a three-month holiday for all businesses. In England, only certain businesses were given rate relief. Had I followed that scheme, which some Members have called for, rates would now be paid on 60% of business properties. My Department will shortly bring to the Executive an extension to the rate relief scheme targeted at the hardest-hit businesses. That, however, is separate from the order in front of us today. This order is about laying the ground for economic recovery in the longer term. It responds to a key concern of businesses for many years: the relatively high level of business rates. In fact, the order delivers an 18% reduction in the non-domestic regional rate.

I turn to the detail of the order and its purpose. The regional rate supplements the Executive's block grant. It helps fund expenditure on health, roads, schools, infrastructure and other essential public services. To underline the significance of the rating system, last year, over £1.3 billion was collected in rates — regional and district, domestic and non-domestic. Taken together, the domestic and non-domestic regional rates set by the order equate to a headline revenue figure in the region of £684 million at the time of the Budget.

The legislation before you today for approval is the outworking of that important Budget decision. The breakdown is that the regional rate represents just over half of a typical rate bill, with the other half made up of the district rate that is set independently by local councils. District rates set for 2020-21 are high in some councils as a result of their financial difficulties.

2.15 pm

Today's order fixes two separate regional rate in the pound figures for 2020-21: one for households and one for businesses. The new rate in the pound figure freezes the domestic regional rate for the 2020-21 rating year for households. In other words, there is no increase on last year's domestic regional rate poundage. Our household rates charges are relatively low here, but this freeze is important given the financial pressure on households at this time. On the non-domestic side, the over 6p cut to last year's poundage represents a very significant 18% reduction. These, together, will help household and commercial budgets as we emerge from the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will close these opening remarks by addressing technical matters concerning the order. Its main purpose is to give effect to the poundage decisions already made during the Budget process by specifying the regional rate poundage for 2020-21. Article 1 sets out the title of the order and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides that the order will apply for the 2020-21 rating year through to 31 March 2021. Article 3 specifies 27.9p in the pound as the commercial regional poundage, and 0.4574p in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage.

I look forward to hearing Members' comments, and I commend the order to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): May I, as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, pass on our condolences to John's family and to all his friends. He will be a very much-missed Member of the Assembly. We wish his family all the best in these trying and difficult circumstances.

As has been outlined by the Minister, the purpose of the proposed statutory rule is to set the amount of the domestic and non-domestic regional rates for the year ending 31 March 2021. The order stipulates the regional rate for domestic and non-domestic property expressed in pence per pound that will apply for the 2020-21 rating year. The poundage laid out in the proposed rule will reflect the Executive's Budget for domestic and non-domestic purposes.

The policy proposals contained in the statutory rule were considered by the Committee at its meeting on 5 February 2020. The Committee had no issues to raise in respect of those policy proposals at that time. The Committee formally considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 22 April 2020, along with the accompanying report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, who had no points to raise in the technical scrutiny of this rule.

Much has changed since the Committee's initial consideration of the outlying policy proposals, but it is necessary — and I re-emphasise that it is necessary — to enable the Department to issue rate bills to ratepayers. Naturally, any measures taken by the Executive to provide financial support to ratepayers during the current crisis will draw on the resources received as part of the COVID-19 response.

Whilst I am mindful that the next item of business is on the Budget, it is important to recognise that the collection of rates provides vital funding for the delivery of our public services. However, that being said, I suspect that every Member here has heard the concerns, particularly from the business sector, about the burden that non-domestic rates have on day-to-day cash flow.

The Minister previously outlined his intention to review the wider rating system. The Committee will be keen to consider any policy proposals and will work constructively with the Department early in that process. The Committee agreed to recommend that statutory rule No. 59, The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020, be affirmed by the Assembly. Therefore, Mr Deputy Speaker, we support the motion. Thank you.

Mr Lynch: I welcome the Minister's statement. As the Chair said, we will have further discussion on matters

relating to the issue afterwards in the Budget. However, I welcome the order as an important element in the much wider programme that the Executive will need to put in place as we move through the immediate health and economic traumas of COVID-19. Whilst responding to events as they unfold, the Assembly must begin to plan for the long-term economic recovery. The order addresses the issue of high business rates, which, as the previous Member to speak said, have been raised with most of us, particularly by business people, and it delivers an 18% reduction in the non-domestic rate. The order also freezes the domestic regional rate for the next year for struggling households during this difficult period. There will be no increase on last year's domestic regional rate. Therefore, I welcome the order.

Mr O'Toole: First, on behalf of the SDLP, I want to thank other Members for their remarks and condolences on the passing of John Dallat MLA. In some ways, it is ironic that I am the first person from our party to talk about John's legacy and our sadness at his passing, given that my time serving in the Chamber has been fairly brief, but, in that brief time, like everyone in the Chamber, I experienced his extraordinary integrity, courage, passion for the people of East Derry and commitment to inclusive politics in this place. He was one of the few people who served in the original Northern Ireland Assembly, having been elected in 1998, along with you, Mr Deputy Speaker. People who served with him through that time know the size of his character and his heart. It is an immensely sad time for his family and all those who knew and worked with him. I hope that we will have some more time to reflect on his legacy in the Chamber.

I am a member of the Finance Committee, and as the Chair and Sean Lynch, a fellow member, have said, we discussed the rates order in the Committee and approved its passing. I want to make the point — I will make it again in my remarks on the Budget — that, in a sense, the changed times that we are all living in since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis mean that we have to look, almost from first principles, at how we do fiscal policy in this place. As the Minister and the Chair of the Finance Committee said, regional rates, non-domestic and domestic, are one of the only revenue tools that the devolved institutions here have. However, taking a step back, we can see that the people on whom that burden falls greatest are small businesses in Northern Ireland, particularly small retail and hospitality businesses. Which are the sectors of the economy that have been hardest hit by the necessary steps that we have had to take because of COVID-19? It is hospitality and small retail. That cannot be right. We need to be able to have stable and reliable revenue sources in addition to the block grant, but we also need to be able to recover our economy. The order was processed or, as it were, born, before the COVID-19 crisis and everything that came with it. That has changed things entirely; it has changed the entire assumptions on which the tax is based. We do not know what the commercial property sector will look like in the medium- to long-term. While I support the principle of the order — there was no alternative to supporting the principle of the order to allow the Department and Land and Property Services (LPS) to continue their business this year — I would say —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will give way briefly.

Mr Wells: I had not indicated that I wished to speak in the debate, but I was one of the Members who entered the Assembly in 1998 with John Dallat. It is appropriate that the Member is speaking now, because I want to pay tribute to John.

John and I sat together on many Committees in the Assembly, including his favourite, the Public Accounts Committee. He was the scourge of government overspending. He made an enormous contribution to the House over 22 years and will be missed greatly as one of the very few Members, including me, who arrived in 1998. Many of us would like to be in Kilrea to pay our respects. We will not have that opportunity, which is very sad. I certainly would have been there had I been allowed to do so.

My intervention is entirely not in order, but I am glad that it has given me the opportunity to pay tribute to someone whom I regarded as a great friend.

Mr O'Toole: I am glad that the Member intervened and that I gave way. I will conclude my remarks at that and defer to what the Member has said. It is an extremely sad time for everyone here who values inclusive politics and making this place work.

Mr Muir: I join with others and express my condolences on behalf of the Alliance Party to the family and friends of John Dallat. I have only been here a short time, but we managed to have a conversation outside a number of months ago. It was around his dogged determination to ensure justice for Inga Maria Hauser, who was murdered in 1988. He fought that case very hard. All of us would agree that the best legacy to John would be ensuring that the perpetrators of that murder are brought to justice. Our thoughts are, obviously, with John's family at this time.

In relation to the order, as a new boy, I looked at the last time the Assembly debated a rates order and what the protocol was for contributions. The debate was on 22 February 2016. It lasted less than 15 minutes, but it was at 11.00 pm. The situation that we are facing today, in 2020, is very different and, perhaps, it merits a bit more debate due to the circumstances that we find ourselves in, with the affirmation of the order occurring in May, as opposed to February, and the future so uncertain.

At the outset, I declare that I was previously a member of Ards and North Down Borough Council. I welcome the decision to cut the regional non-domestic rate by 4p, delivering an overall reduction of 18% and alleviating somewhat the impact of Reval2020, which hit some sectors very hard, especially hospitality and hotels.

Historically, in Northern Ireland, business rates, as the Minister outlined, have been much higher than in Great Britain. Papers that led to the 'New Decade, New Approach' document detailed that as a significant issue of concern for businesses. Options for action were set out but, at that time, were not felt to be feasible. I am, therefore, pleased to see action on the issue in the making of the order, and I hope that it can be sustained in the future to ensure that the rates burden is fairly shared.

As Members are aware, rates in Northern Ireland are made up of the regional and the district rate, which provide the main source of income for our 11 local councils. In the current economic circumstances, a serious and almost certain risk exists that the revenue forecast for district councils, when striking the rates in February, will be much

lower than anticipated, whether derived by the district rate or by provision of services, such as leisure, planning, tourism and more.

We are, therefore, making the order in the knowledge that the levels set do not secure the financial future of our councils. The arrears that are likely to arise for domestic and non-domestic rates, or the downturn in the estimated penny product for the non-domestic property base, are storing up a crisis for local government and making double-digit rises across Northern Ireland in the next financial year almost certain, if assistance is not provided centrally. The delay in the dispatch of bills will help somewhat to reduce the level of arrears, but bills will still end up being higher than before.

It is, therefore, of paramount importance that the Department of Finance, working in conjunction with the Department for Communities, provides the financial assistance necessary to ensure that our councils can continue, do not become insolvent and are not forced to implement swingeing cuts and massive rate hikes next year to recoup the unanticipated costs arising from COVID-19. To witness the collapse of one form of local government in Northern Ireland that has continued through thick and thin would be a tragic mistake, overlooking the valuable role played in delivering key services, such as waste collection, burial, planning, leisure and economic development, alongside local civic representation.

History will judge whether the decision to offer full rate relief for all businesses for the first three months of this financial year was the right one in the use of public funds. However, the Executive found themselves in unique circumstances and needed to take an urgent decision to provide immediate support, so it was the right decision at the time. The decision on whether to extend the rate relief beyond the end of June now needs to be taken. In the context of the ability to review the effectiveness of the blanket relief, and the understanding of sectors most in need of further assistance, I urge the Minister to consider targeted relief extension, taking into account those businesses that will remain under lockdown restrictions and struggle to come back as soon as others, such as, for example, the retail, aviation, hospitality, leisure and tourism industries.

LPS conducted a non-domestic rating review in 2019, and the consultation closed on 11 November. In the challenging circumstances in which we now find ourselves, it is even more important that the recommendations arising from that review are brought forward, evaluated by an independent panel and published for consideration. The new economic circumstances require, more than ever, a fit-for-purpose business rating system, which is not focused purely on bricks and mortar, but ensures that businesses not only survive but thrive.

Alliance will vote for this order but requests that clarity is given by the Minister on the issues raised, whether they are in relation to securing a sustainable financial future for local government, the extension of the non-domestic rates relief or the status of the non-domestic rating review.

2.30 pm

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for coming here today, and I thank everyone for their kind words about John Dallat. I saw John just last week; I went out to see him and was

talking with him. I had to go out to see him simply because I was put on a Committee that he was on. When I went out to visit John he was not well, but he still had that fire in him. He and I were trying to plan a trip to Munich; I have a daughter who lives in Dachau and we were going to try to go over to follow-up on the terrible tragedy, which Mr Muir mentioned, of young Inga Hauser's murder. John was still up for the trip. The day that I was there was the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Dachau, which was the first concentration camp. It was in Germany, but it was the very first one and was the model for the rest of them. I was able to talk to John and, as I say, he lit up.

I will miss John. I know there will be a time for the House to pay tribute to him, but I genuinely miss him. He was a good man. I knew him long before I ever went into politics; I knew him from the bar but that is neither here nor there now. *[Laughter.]* As so many Members have said, I have no option but to support the order. I see the small reductions that are being made, but there are a lot of small businesses like my sister's, who rang me last night. She and her family have a very busy house and one pub in the centre of Belfast. They have no money and have used up whatever savings they had on the rates. The three-month rates holiday was welcome for them, but they are trying to come out of the current situation and they can find no way of sustaining their business if the lockdown continues much longer. There is no way that they will find the resources that they need if they have to try to operate a business through distancing in a public house, because that will not be possible.

The review has been carried out, and it will be much fairer to get away from bricks and mortar and look at turnover. That is for the days ahead, and we will be able to debate such issues in the Budget debate. I have reservations and will reluctantly support the order.

Mr Murphy: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. As I have stated, today's 2020 regional rates order gives effect to decisions that were made as part of the Executive's 2020-21 Budget. The Executive's aim is to strike a balance between meeting the needs of ratepayers during what will be a challenging long-term economic environment and ensuring that public finances are sufficient to cover the priorities that we have set ourselves.

Turning to some of the points that were raised, I appreciate the support expressed for the order. Matthew O'Toole mentioned revenue raising, which is an issue that we have discussed on many of the occasions that I have spoken in the Chamber. He will be aware that I am committed to looking at the fiscal levers that are available to us. That work is even more important in the time ahead, given the circumstances that we face.

In relation to council finances, which Andrew Muir mentioned, of course we will continue to engage with councils and try to ensure that they have the necessary resources. There is no question of local government going under or going out of business. Councils, like all other public departments, will find that a certain amount of the money that they had budgeted spending in this quarter will not now be spent. From my experience of talking to some councils, they are already looking to see where they can find savings as well as recognising that they have a reduced income from the normal services that they provide. However, there will be savings from contributions that would have made to various events, particularly over

the summer months, that will probably not go ahead. We will continue to look at that and look at the finances that are available to councils through the rates discussions with them.

I of course get the points that Mr Catney raised in relation to the ongoing struggle of small businesses, although that is not part of this. This does contribute to businesses through the reduction of the non-domestic rate over the year and further into the future, but obviously the Executive want to look at other interventions that we can make. There has been, I think, over £0.5 billion-worth of interventions to try to support businesses to date. We understand that the economy will struggle in the time ahead and we will continue to do what we can.

I trust that Members will show the necessary support for the order. I believe that a strategic approach to the domestic regional rate and, in particular, the non-domestic regional rate will be welcomed by households and businesses alike.

In closing, I thank the Committee Chair, members and staff, for their work in reviewing the concept of the order at its meeting on 5 February and the substance of it on 22 April. The timing of the Executive's return, the late Westminster Budget and the issues facing us all as a result of COVID-19 have been real challenges, and I welcome, therefore, the Committee's work to assist the Department in its scrutiny, and I look forward to working with it, hopefully in a more typical environment in the months ahead as normality begins to return. I commend the order to the Assembly and ask Members to affirm it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Budget 2020-21

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Finance to move the motion.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2020-21 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 31 March 2020 and the further detailed information laid on 30 April 2020.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for this debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate, at his discretion, between proposing and winding up the debate. The Chair of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes. I call the Minister to open the debate.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This Budget was constructed in unprecedented circumstances. The restoration of the Executive in January and the Chancellor's Budget on 11 March meant that there was a limited period in which to develop this Budget. In addition, the Budget has been overshadowed by the outbreak of COVID-19.

In his Budget on 11 March, the Chancellor announced initial measures in response to the economic disruption caused by COVID-19. The allocations arising from those measures were included in the statement that I provided to the Assembly on 16 March 2020. Since then, the British Government have made further announcements on funding for the response to COVID-19, and while some of the measures apply here, the Executive receive Barnett consequential on any funding provided for England only. Legislation prevented me from including further COVID-19 funding in the Budget subsequently laid on 31 March. However, the Executive have taken forward the COVID-19 response separately.

While the Budget outcome does not reflect the full COVID-19 funding, the Budget document does contain details of how Departments are responding to the challenges presented by the pandemic. It also outlines the measures that have received additional funding so far. The Executive have allocated funding to support businesses; to maintain public services, including our health service; and to protect the vulnerable.

Although our block grant has still not been restored to its pre-austerity levels in real terms, the Executive have been able to support businesses and households. Domestic regional rates, which are already relatively low, have been frozen, and the non-domestic regional rate has been reduced by 4p in the pound, and that, combined with the revaluation, will see average bills fall by 18%. A three-month rates holiday has been provided to all businesses to help them cope with the lockdown. All Departments have received real terms increases.

The Executive have prioritised our key services, with the non-ring-fenced resource budget for Health breaking £6 billion for the first time and Education being given an 11% increase from its baseline. The Budget will also allocate £1.6 billion to capital investment. Ministers have been given flexibility to reallocate resources so that they can

respond to the new challenges that have been created by COVID-19.

The Budget is being presented in very difficult circumstances but it offers a platform to support businesses, maintain public services and protect vulnerable people during the crisis. I commend the Budget to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): As the Minister has outlined, the motion seeks the Assembly's approval for the expenditure proposals that are contained in the Budget, which was laid on 31 March 2020, and the supporting information that was laid last week. As we are acutely aware, the resumption of routine Assembly business has taken a significant detour while we understand and react to the impacts on our society that have been caused by the devastating pandemic and the significant challenges that we all face to mitigate them.

The events leading up to the collapse of the Executive in 2016 are well rehearsed and I do not intend to revisit them today. However, they have provided the necessary catalyst to change how we as elected representatives meet our responsibilities to scrutinise the Executive. Due to circumstances that relate to the timing of the Executive's return and the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Budget process has been far from ideal. However, it was necessary in order to try to get us back into a normal budgetary cycle.

For this Budget cycle, the Committee for Finance has revised the usual methodology to help facilitate a more consistent, coordinated and productive approach to gathering budgetary information from Departments. A key aspect of that work was the introduction of a standardised template, which was developed in conjunction with the Assembly's research and information service (RaISe) to provide a reliable baseline of evidence to assist all Assembly Committees and the Committee for Finance to deliver a more consistent approach on how information is sought from Departments and presented to Committees. I want to convey my special thanks to the RaISe researchers for their invaluable contribution to developing that approach and for the analysis of the departmental responses under what were considerable and significant time constraints. I also want to thank all Committees for adhering to the time frame that was set by the Committee for Finance to coordinate and contribute to today's business.

At its meeting on 22 April, the Committee considered evidence on the Department of Finance's requirements. Although the Department has smaller resource requirements compared with others, its functions fulfil a critical role in coordinating expenditure across government Departments. It has been difficult for all Committees to fully scrutinise their Department's budget because of the condensed process for Budget scrutiny resulting from the Assembly returning to normal business shortly before the deadline for the Budget Bill, restrictions that were imposed on Committees and Departments as a result of COVID-19 and the consistently changing financial position resulting from funding measures that were put in place to respond to the pandemic.

Despite those difficulties, the approach that was adopted by the Committee for Finance has allowed the Committee to circumvent many of the barriers and find

a way to undertake its scrutiny function at departmental levels. The Committee raised a number of issues with the Department in relation to the departmental budget, including departmental pressures on rates and pay, how IT costs are classified as either resource DEL or capital DEL, provisions that were made for potential slippage in the delivery of projects, departmental borrowing and funding related to Brexit. The Department made a timely response to the issues that were raised, which was considered and approved by the Committee at last week's meeting. The Committee is, therefore, satisfied that it has had the appropriate opportunity to adequately scrutinise the Department of Finance's budget.

I will now move on to the Executive's budget. In the Minister's statement on 31 March, there was a funding provision of £120 million specifically in response to COVID-19. Further measures have, subsequently, been announced by our Chancellor of the Exchequer as the situation has developed and the impact of the pandemic on health and the economy has become, regrettably, clearer. The Department of Finance has also laid a Budget document that includes details of further COVID-19 funding bringing the total provision to £1.19 billion, which has been provided, quite remarkably, in less than four weeks from our national Exchequer.

The Committee's focus to date in relation to the allocation of that funding has been on scrutinising the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) for our front-line workers and volunteers and on how resources are being used to support the economy and employment, mainly through non-domestic rates measures.

2.45 pm

Appropriate resource allocations to Health and Economy, in the response to COVID-19, are critical if we are to fight the virus, reduce its spread and mitigate the long-term impacts on our economy. Sufficient and timely preparation to respond and revitalise our economy, once we start to emerge from the lockdown and to rebuild our economy and society, is also essential.

The Committee considered the Minister's announcement that he intends to bring forward a further Vote on Account aimed at preventing COVID-19 departmental spending from exceeding limits contained in the Budget Act that was recently passed. Having received notification from the Department on Friday 24 April that, in the absence of a further Vote on Account and Budget Bill, there is a risk that Departments will exceed their authorised spending limits, the Committee broadened the scope of its oral evidence session last week to receive evidence and question officials on the matter.

Officials confirmed that the Departments most at risk of exceeding those limits are, not surprisingly, Economy, Health, and Communities, but also Education, and Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Officials also explained that it is likely that some Departments will need to access in excess of their indicated budget allocation because payments are being front-loaded in order to support the requirements of our recovering economy. It is important to note that the Committee received assurances that, in such instances, those totals would not exceed the combined totals contained in the Budget and coronavirus-related allocations.

The Budget cycle is an ongoing process, which is currently being implemented in an ever-changing environment. Given the current circumstances, the Committee is content with the progress that is being made to date. The Committee will continue to scrutinise the Budget position as it develops and will expect the Department of Finance to be proactive in including the Committee in regular ongoing consultation.

The Committee will, of course, consider the additional Budget Bill in detail when it is presented to the Committee. The Committee will expect to be appropriately consulted on the Bill prior to considering whether it is content to grant accelerated passage in line with provisions under Standing Order 42(2).

The current circumstances underline the need for timely and relevant information and engagement with Committees at all stages and, particularly, during the in-year monitoring process. June monitoring will be the first opportunity that Committees have to formally scrutinise how Departments and the Executive's spending plans are being implemented. I encourage all Committees to make the most of that opportunity.

As we look to the future, we will need to consider how we plan for and shape our recovery from the devastating economic effects of the pandemic. It is crucial that we put the appropriate support in place to breathe new life into our economy. At last week's meeting, the Committee questioned officials on how plans for recovery are being taken forward. It was encouraging to hear that the public spending directorate is part of the group that has been established in the Department for the Economy to look at just that issue. Although it is at an early stage, the Committee will view progress in that group with interest, and, in that regard, I have written to the Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy to consider how our two Committees can work together on that important, cross-cutting matter.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the motion.

I will now make some remarks — very short remarks, you will be glad to hear — as the finance spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. I think that only the most narrow-minded politicians would query the efforts of the Government in London to provide necessary resource during the crisis. However, where legitimate questions do arise is in the speed and overall response of some Executive Departments to pass on resource and support to our business community, our disadvantaged, our employed, our transport infrastructure and our third sector. Many in the House will have dealt with complaints and quite justifiable concerns that our citizens are not being as equitably treated as those in the rest of the United Kingdom. In a budgetary context, much of the resource required to sustain our people is there; what is lacking is any strategy or evidence of a longer-term plan. Plans have already been outlined in Scotland and Wales, by our Prime Minister in his five points, and even by our close neighbours in Dublin.

The UUP has called time and again for a recovery plan to be created; a plan that involves all the key stakeholders. We have even asked that the New Decade, New Approach Programme for Government be refocused to COVID recovery. Now is the time for all parties to join us and show

leadership in delivering for all of the people of Northern Ireland.

On behalf of the UUP, I say that the party supports the motion.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): Mr Deputy Speaker, I also pass on my condolences to John Dallat's family at this very sad time.

The Committee for Communities was briefed by officials on the Department's budget position on 22 April. The Committee acknowledges the extremely difficult circumstances in which the Department has compiled the budget, given the funding requirements for COVID-19 actions to date and the uncertainty that the crisis has presented. The headline resource DEL budget for 2020-21 is £824 million. The Committee noted that, while specific budget allocations have been made, they are subject to change depending on the Minister's priorities and the evolving impact of the COVID-19 position.

What was most striking about the briefing was the uncertainty regarding any funding specifics beyond quarter one and the generally heavily caveated nature of the estimates provided to the Committee. The COVID-19 budget requirements for quarter one alone total almost £61 million, with a projected requirement of just over £49 million per quarter for the remaining three quarters. Of course, the Committee recognises that recent priorities have all been COVID-19-related, and the Committee has supported the Minister in her initiatives to support those people impacted as a result of the crisis. We also note that each of these initiatives has generally come with a significant price tag.

I am sure that many here have heard from their party's local councillors about the pressure that councils are under. The reduction in the revenue of local councils is not sustainable for much longer. We heard just last week of at least one council planning redundancies, and there have been conflicting analyses of whether councils can place staff on the Government's furlough scheme. I note that last night the Minister for Communities confirmed that council workers can apply for the furlough scheme. That will come as a welcome relief to many councils, but it does not solve the significant financial pressures that councils are under as a result of COVID-19.

The Department has sought £16.5 million for councils in quarter one, and in subsequent quarters, but over the medium term this is unlikely to be enough to enable councils to continue to deliver the services that ratepayers expect. The Committee is scheduled to hear from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) next week, and hopefully the financial position of councils will be made clear. Perhaps the Minister can say a few words about the likelihood of additional funding in the coming months for councils.

The Committee was told, and is concerned, that, if more funding for COVID-19 is not forthcoming, the Department will be under pressure to find the requirements from its existing budget. What is also concerning is that the Department envisages additional funding demands as a result of the New Decade, New Approach agreement and the potential impact of EU exit. Officials noted that, on those two issues, there was significant uncertainty around requirements and funding available. With uncertainty being the prevailing theme of our briefing, it is likely that the

figures we discussed a couple of weeks ago with officials will be unrecognisable in the coming weeks.

Some funding issues have been agreed. The extension of some of the welfare mitigation measures agreed as part of the NDNA agreement have a cost of £41.7 million for 2020-21, and the Department was allocated £40.3 million to meet those mitigation requirements, over half of which will go towards the social sector size criteria. At any other time, we would be discussing in detail how we continue to fund the mitigation measures beyond 2021 — a difficult enough decision to reach in normal times, given the range of other competing priorities and financial limitations. Now, as a result of COVID-19, we will have many more people claiming universal credit who will not have had the same protections as those who were already on benefits when the mitigation measures were introduced. That presents us with the increasing moral dilemma of a possible two-tier benefits system. Clearly, we need agreement on what a sustainable and stable benefits system should look like.

The current circumstances have clearly made what we might consider "normal" prioritising and budgeting something of a moveable feast. The Committee was advised that officials would be working to finalise figures over the coming weeks, meaning that the June monitoring round was likely to be the more informative point in the budgetary cycle, rather than anything we might hear this week. The flexibility afforded to Ministers to reallocate internal funding as part of the June monitoring round is important. It is perhaps more important than ever this year, given that there is likely to be very little money to be surrendered to the centre for redistribution. I note that flexibility is to be kept under review by the Executive and may be extended if necessary. The Committee would certainly support flexibility in internal reallocation. The Committee urges the Minister for Communities to decide on her priorities sooner rather than later and to make the appropriate allocations based on a strategic way forward.

One of the Committee's main concerns was the impact of COVID-19 on capital funding. The Committee would be supportive of taking as flexible as possible an approach to capital funding to ensure that key projects are not put at risk. The Committee welcomes the increased bid of £232.25 million for new-build social homes. That is an increase of £145.86 million from last year and meets the NDNA commitment to increase the number of social homes to 3,000 a year.

The Committee supports the £55 million bid for financial transactions capital (FTC) and notes the additional bid for £55 million capital DEL in case the legislation to reclassify registered housing associations as private entities is not progressed in time. The Committee will hopefully be briefed by the Minister next week on that legislation. If its progress is agreed with the Committee, we hope that the £55 million FTC bid will ultimately be successful.

The COVID-19 crisis will clearly continue to delay projects. When, for example, housing associations are having to plan for new builds, including buying land and getting planning permission, the possibility that they will be able to spend the allocated budget before the end of year is remote. Therefore, looking ahead, the Committee would like flexibility to be extended to capital projects.

To say that the budgetary position of the Department for Communities is evolving is to state the obvious. It is clear

that we will know more when the Minister's priorities are decided.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Chairperson to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms P Bradley: We look forward to liaising with the Minister on those matters over the coming months and to lending her our support.

Mr Lynch: As a member of the Finance Committee, I commend the Minister for setting the Budget and for the numerous initiatives that he has designed to protect our people and mitigate the damage to the economy during these very challenging times.

When we first sat as a Committee some three months ago, little did anyone know that the Budget of 2020-21 would be overshadowed by an unprecedented public health crisis: a crisis that would impact on all our lives, both socially and economically. In his statement to the Chamber in March, the Minister said:

"Protecting lives and livelihoods from the pandemic is now our number one priority." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p235, col 1].

In that regard, many Members will want to know whether help will be available in our response to the COVID-19 crisis. Since the beginning of March, that priority has dominated everything that we do as elected representatives. The Minister has confirmed in the Budget the level of funding allocated to the various Departments for the period 2020-21 and the level of funding available to offset the huge impact of COVID-19. Separate from the departmental allocation set out in the first section, the COVID-19 response has included funding of £1 billion allocated to maintain public services, support businesses and protect the most vulnerable. I commend all Ministers for getting the money from that funding out the door as quickly as possible. I know from speaking to many businesses and communities that the assistance has been welcomed.

The grants and schemes did not cover everyone, however. That was understandable, because of the speed with which Ministers and the Executive had to react to the developing health crisis and the virtual close down of society. I know that the Minister has recognised that and given an undertaking to look at schemes to try to cover those who have fallen through the net.

I commend the Minister for Communities for the assistance that she has given to the most vulnerable. It is encouraging to witness parcels being delivered to our local communities. I commend her for the work that she has done to include charities, communities and the voluntary sector. She has demonstrated flexibility with grant funding. That has meant a reduction in bureaucracy on important measures in order to help communities and the voluntary sector and to make things easier for them. Measures include no need for fees and more simple applications for grants.

The COVID-19 community support fund that she announced is also to be welcomed. The fund released £1.5 million, initially though local government's existing support programme and the Community Foundation's small grants programme, to tackle the crisis at a local level.

From talking to communities and sports organisations, I know that the way in which these programmes reach the

most vulnerable is hugely appreciated. Credit should also go to the staff who are making all this happen in difficult circumstances.

3.00 pm

As I said in the earlier debate on the rates order, and as most Members will have encountered, rates are a huge issue, particularly since the COVID-19 outbreak. In these challenging times, the 18% reduction in the non-domestic rate and freezing of the domestic regional rate for the next year will be welcomed by struggling households and businesses.

I turn to the Budget itself. Even before the arrival of COVID-19, the Budget had been initiated in a very different financial context. In real terms, the block grant was some £360 million below pre-austerity levels. Over that period, the pressure on public services has increased. Indeed, that has been highlighted to an extent in the process to tackle COVID-19. However, despite the pressures, the Minister has been able to deliver a Budget that, compared with last year, provides a real-terms increase to all Departments. I am encouraged that he has prioritised the Department of Education and the Department of Health, which, for the first time, have been allocated over £6 billion in resource funding. There is £1.6 billion of capital allocated to investment in infrastructure, an increase in much-needed funding for broadband and support for the construction industry. These allocations will support the economy and, hopefully, assist in the recovery from the current crisis.

I also welcome the flexibility that the Minister has given each Department to re-profile its budget in response to the health emergency, with particular focus on protecting key services and businesses and looking after the most vulnerable. That flexibility is important in allowing Departments to be agile in their planning for the challenges that arise during this unprecedented period.

Finally, on the in-year Budget, I am aware that the Executive and the Minister support bringing forward multi-year Budgets that will give greater certainty to public services. The Committee for Finance looks forward to working with the Minister on the process to ensure that that will happen in future.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that you will give me, as chairman of the SDLP, a little latitude for a moment to offer my condolences to the family of our colleague John Dallat at this sad time. John was a representative of East Derry for a generation, and a teacher before that. Always in a community role and working hard, he had a fire in his belly that most of us would be jealous of. I appreciate the remarks made by colleagues in the House today, and I know that his family — his wife, Anne, his children, Helena, Ronan and Diarmuid and his eight grandchildren will take great comfort from them. I appreciate, too, that, next week, we will have an opportunity for a full and proper reflection on John's immense contribution to life in civic Ireland.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate and thank the Minister of Finance for bringing it to the House. There is no doubt that there have been unusual challenges around this year's Budget. Not only are we dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic that has turned our world upside

down and changed beyond recognition the way we work and conduct our lives but we are still feeling the effect of the three-year absence of a fully functioning Government, which has resulted in a compressed timetable for Budget planning. Despite these circumstances, it is important that Committees conduct their scrutiny in as thorough a manner as possible, and we have all endeavoured to do that in these very challenging and unsettling times. As is the case with other Statutory Committees, the Committee for the Executive Office adopted a standardised Committee scrutiny approach to the Budget. As part of that approach, it issued a budget template to the Executive Office to capture relevant information on the 2019-2020 financial year, the resource and capital requirements for the 2020-21 year and the revenue expected.

At this point, I put on record the Committee's thanks to the Assembly's research team for developing the template. It has proved really useful in helping the Committee to look back and forward to get the full financial picture.

Departmental officials attended the Committee meeting on 22 April to answer members' questions on the pressures that it had identified and the Budget allocation made by the Executive. A formal response to the Budget was then agreed at the Committee meeting on 29 April, and I will now rehearse some of the main points contained in it. The Executive Office received an uplift in budget of over 72%, primarily due to the inclusion of £37.5 million for the historical institutional abuse payments, and a total of £98 million has been allocated to the Department. Similar to previous times, significant pressures were identified. There were inescapable pressures totalling £151 million, pre-committed pressures totalling £33 million and one high-priority pressure of £0.5 million, covering departmental running costs. In relation to capital, the Department identified inescapable pressures of £10 million and pre-committed pressures of nearly £9 million. The Department has also identified £5.2 million of anticipated income, although the Committee noted that the majority of that income represents recoupment of existing departmental costs and is therefore required to meet the Department's resource pressures.

Given the time limits of the debate, I do not want to go into every pressure that was identified, but I do want to draw attention to some, including a number that have not received an allocation. A pressure of nearly £1 million was identified for NDNA programme delivery, covering management and preparatory work on language, identity and cultural expression, including progressing legislation and the creation of the relevant bodies. The Executive's Budget did not include an allocation for this area, however the Department will take forward this work using existing baseline resources and will progress legislation and the creation of the relevant bodies as the operation of the Assembly and available resource permit during the current crisis.

During the evidence sessions with officials, clarifications were sought on whether the £5.83 million pressure that had been identified earlier in the year for the same area was no longer relevant. The Committee was advised that the earlier-identified amount was a marker bid as costs for the scheme had not been determined at that stage. The Committee noted that, and, given the current COVID-19 pandemic, timing around the introduction of the legislation is unclear, and, therefore, significant expenditure into 2020-21 is very unlikely.

As I mentioned earlier, the uplift in the Executive Office budget was primarily due to the allocation of funding for the historical institutional abuse redress scheme, and it is very much welcomed. All members share the view that the costs should be met centrally from the block grant for the lifetime of the scheme. However, there is also a very strongly held view that robust efforts should be made to secure funds from those institutions that were involved in the abuse. It is important that they take responsibility and share the costs with the public sector. The Committee understands that there has been some initial contact between the Executive Office and the institutions, and this is an area that the Committee will follow up on. The redress scheme has now commenced, and, while the Committee is very much in favour of increasing the cap on the maximum amounts payable to victims and survivors, it appreciates that the introduction of legislation necessary to do that could cause unwarranted delays in the payments being made to those who have already waited far too long for the redress scheme. I would like to point out very clearly that the Committee believes that the maximum amounts payable should be more. The victims and survivors deserve more.

Turning now to capital, included was a £2.3 million pressure for ongoing development of the Ebrington site and £5.2 million pressures for capital programmes within the Urban Villages programme. When asked for certainty around funding for this work, officials assured the Committee that there was no threat to the availability of capital funding, and this was very much welcomed.

There were other pressures identified that did not receive an allocation in the Executive's Budget. COVID-19 is one such pressure, and the Committee appreciates that the bulk of funding allocated through the Barnett formula to deal with the COVID pandemic is being used to support the health response to the pandemic.

With time pressing on, I would like to mention the issue of legacy. I mention as an individual MLA that there is a bit of concern on this. Payments to victims of the Troubles here have taken too long. As it stands, we have no scheme and we do not know who will pay for it. These individuals are some of the most deserving in our community, people who were going about their daily life only to be caught up in an incident —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr McGrath: — and, as a result, have lifelong injuries. Those injuries have changed their lives, and we hope that some scheme can be developed so that they can get the pensions that they so richly deserve.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will begin by responding to the Budget debate as Chairperson of the Education Committee in relation to the budget for the Department of Education, which, as we know, is in financial crisis.

The Department of Education previously advised the Education Committee of financial pressures of £427 million for 2020-21. Although that included £148 million for teacher and non-teachers' pay, £80 million for the Education Authority and £60 million-plus for school budgets, the Department for Education has been allocated £227 million — some £200 million less than the amount requested. Due to COVID-19, some of the expenditure

planned by the Department of Education has been paused, but the Department's non-COVID-19 resource pressures still exceed the Budget 2020-21 allocation by £165 million.

Education Committee members are particularly alarmed to learn of the increasing annual pay pressure in education, which may conceivably exceed £200 million by 2022-23. That significant financial challenge, as I have stated clearly on many occasions, demands radical reform and reorganisation of education in Northern Ireland. The consequences of that funding gap for education are severe, but Education Committee members are clear that no cuts as a result of that financial gap should fall on special educational needs provision, mental health and emotional well-being, tackling underachievement linked to deprivation and delivering equal educational opportunity for all.

The Education Committee also reiterates its support for the restoration of modest funding for the BookTrust Bookstart programme, which is a low-cost, high-impact early years literacy programme. The programme is even more important during social isolation, as, whilst reading has thankfully increased for many families, a significant number of children are at risk of inadequate access to resources and learning. Indeed, BookTrust research published on 1 May found that 22% of parents are unable to complete any home education with their children, and 14% are unable to read to, or with, their children. That, surely, is an issue to which we, the Budget and the Education and Finance Ministers must respond.

I encourage any parents or guardians who have internet access and are struggling with reading at home to visit the www.booktrust.org.uk/hometime-ni website to access local authors and artists who are demonstrating reading and drawing activities for families, and for links to other valuable programmes, such as the Libraries NI and Fighting Words websites. Not everyone has access to the internet, which is why BookTrust's Bookstart programme is such a worthwhile investment for the Executive and why I am eager to hear what, if any, plans the Executive have to provide internet and computer resources to those children and young people who are in need of them.

The Education Committee welcomes funding for a number of essential COVID-19 measures, such as the free school meals payment and the childcare support scheme, which is being delivered by the Education and Health Departments in partnership. There are, however, families in Northern Ireland who do not have a bank account and who are not therefore in receipt of the free school meals payments that they need. The Education Committee has raised the matter with the Education Minister.

The £12 million childcare support scheme is, of course, welcome, but its implementation by the Health and Education Ministers is taking too long and asking too much of our highly valued and dedicated childcare providers. The joint Department of Education and Department of Health childcare support allocation of £12 million was announced on 9 April, yet not a penny has reached childcare providers and a childcare sector that is fighting for survival; a sector that is vital to the development of our children and which will be essential to the recovery of our economy.

It is particularly concerning therefore to learn that PlayBoard NI surveys suggest that up to 20% of childcare providers are unsure if they will be able to reopen further

to the COVID-19 shutdown. The Education Committee has met childcare representative bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Childminding Association, Early Years, PlayBoard, Employers for Childcare, Northern Ireland Day Care Owners and the Employers Forum for Early Years Playwork and Childminders. We will do all that we can to support the prompt and sensible delivery of the COVID-19 childcare support scheme to that key sector.

3.15 pm

The Education Committee has also consistently raised the need for the urgent delivery of adequate pay for substitute teachers during the period of COVID-19 social isolation, and it is increasingly concerned by accounts of significant hardship being experienced by dedicated substitute teachers in our community and expect that to be urgently addressed by the Education Minister.

The Education Committee also asks the Executive to support all funding for educational settings to safeguard the well-being and educational development of our children and young people on their return from COVID-19 lockdown.

There are some aspects of the Department of Education COVID-19 budget requests for which the Education Committee seeks further rationale, such as approximately £4 million for preparatory schools and boarding schools.

Turning now to capital expenditure, the Department of Education had a budget of around £157 million for 2019-2020 and £138 million for 2020-21. The Committee accepts that that is, to an extent, due to the COVID-19 shutdown, but the disrepair of much of our school estate must be addressed.

I realise that I am running out of time, so perhaps the Finance Minister could speak with some clarity on the availability of Fresh Start capital funds, in particular whether there is further clarity on the money for 2020-21.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I express my condolences to John Dallat's family at this very difficult time.

I welcome this opportunity to outline the Committee for Infrastructure's consideration and views for today's debate. I will first reiterate the size of the deficit facing the Department of Infrastructure prior to the current health crisis, before speaking about the impact of COVID-19 on the Department and the budget allocation being discussed by Members today.

During the Committee's scrutiny of departmental finances, the stark situation faced by the Department was made clear. The Department informed the Committee in January that its budget has a recurring structural deficit of £61 million going into 2020-21, which is to rise to £80 million in 2021-22 and to £90 million in 2022-23. While the Department's budget for 2020-21 has increased by 8.6% to £558 million capital and almost £418 million resource, that amounts to an additional £33 million on last year. The Department has warned that:

"The proposed Resource funding increase of £33m for DfI will have severe implications on critical infrastructure services, not least, water and waste water, road maintenance, street lighting repairs, winter gritting and public transport."

The Minister advised that she has yet to decide on the final distribution of allocations for resource and capital and so provided the Committee with only indicative resource budget allocations. Given that the Committee is unable to fully scrutinise the 2020-21 allocations at this stage, I will outline the pressures facing the Department.

With respect to water and sewerage, it has not been possible to fund Northern Ireland Water to the levels recommended by the Utility Regulator. That has meant that Northern Ireland Water has been unable to connect new housing developments and businesses to the sewerage network and has warned that developments at over 100 locations across Northern Ireland have the potential to stagnate. Officials told the Committee that, prior to the 2014-15 departmental budget reductions, the Department would have regularly allocated some £35 million to cover routine maintenance and meet winter requirements. In recent years, that budget has been cut to less than half.

The capital budget for 2019-2020 was £471 million, and the requirement for 2020-21 is £795 million, increasing to £1.4 billion by 2022-23. Officials outlined that the Department prioritises funding for flagship projects, such as the major road upgrades, and says that those are inescapable. The Utility Regulator's determination on Northern Ireland Water funding is inescapable. There is a contract in place to buy new carriages for the rail network and procurement for new buses. Funding for Waterways Ireland, the design phase of York Street and the deficit to Translink also has to be found. The Living with Water Programme requires £1.45 billion capital budget over the next decade. The recent Barton and NIAO reports on structural maintenance of the roads network recommended that the Department of Finance and the Department for Infrastructure work towards ensuring funding of some £143 million per annum on a recurring basis to prevent further deterioration.

I have left the most notable shortfall to last, namely the matter of Translink and the very real possibility that it could become insolvent. As has been well rehearsed, Translink has had a reduced budget of around £13 million per year and has run its service at a deficit and used its reserves to supplement that. The £19 million requested for Translink in the monitoring round was unsuccessful. Next year, Translink's reserves will be well below the level of working capital that it needs and it may cease to be deemed as a growing concern. In many respects, that is academic now given that, as a result of this crisis, Translink's revenue streams have dried up due to social distancing and the lockdown.

The Committee is aware that there is a COVID-19 fund to mitigate those challenges, yet the Committee has had to write to the Minister of Finance for clarity on why the Department for Infrastructure is the only Department not to have received money from that fund. The Infrastructure Minister acknowledged that when she came before the Committee last week. At that briefing the Minister noted that her Department's estimate of COVID-19-related pressures was up to £181 million — £90 million to £114 million are estimated to come from the loss of revenue to Translink. The Committee has been assured that a cast-iron guarantee has been given to cover that loss and to protect public transport. It would be welcome to hear that directly from the Finance Minister, along with his view on the discussions with DFI on furloughing Translink staff.

Turning to Northern Ireland Water, it relies on the income that it receives from businesses to provide its essential

service. Due to the closure of many businesses, the estimate of pressure on Northern Ireland Water's finances is between £17.5 million and £32 million. The Committee was advised that if that revenue stream is not covered, it will render Northern Ireland Water unable to sustain essential public services and put at risk its ability to provide clean and safe drinking water, which is critical for public health, and to effectively treat waste water to protect the environment.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) is primarily funded through fees. The cessation of most of the services provided by DVA has resulted in little to no fee income being collected. However, significant costs continue to be incurred. The Department has estimated that the lost revenue for three months is £8.6 million, increasing to £19.4 million for six months and £30.7 million for nine months. The Department has also warned that if funding for that loss of revenue is not secured, there will be an inability to continue paying fixed costs, such as staff costs, and the trading fund status of DVA may not be sustainable.

That is a grim picture and does not even include the funding that will be required to meet the Department's obligations under New Decade, New Approach. While we welcome the Executive's announcement yesterday of additional money towards city deals and associated infrastructure projects, it is imperative that additional money is found to kick-start the economy with investment prioritised for key capital infrastructure programmes. The Committee for Infrastructure will continue its scrutiny of the Department for Infrastructure's budget as we move through this process.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I too extend my deepest condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of my constituency colleague John Dallat.

It really does not seem that long since I rose to speak in the Chamber during the Second Stage of the Budget Bill in February, yet so much has changed since then. None of us could have imagined the situation that we now find ourselves in. The COVID-19 pandemic and crisis has changed all of our lives in so many ways. The pandemic is the extraordinary backdrop against which we discuss the 2020-21 Budget.

I am sure that the Minister of Finance, other Members present and the Committee Chairs contributing to the debate will acknowledge that this crisis has had a large impact on the Budget process. The Committee for the Economy and, I expect, most other Statutory Committees, will not feel that they have been able to apply the level of scrutiny to the Budget that they normally would at this stage. I know that some members of my Committee have expressed frustration that the Department's budget has been a moving target.

The allocations made in the latest Budget document are likely to be subject to an unknown level of change and that hinders scrutiny. We do not know how long this situation will last and, as a consequence, it is difficult to assess how many of the Department for the Economy's budget allocations can and will be utilised for their original purpose. It will be some months before there is a truly clear picture of the impact that the COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent Executive response is having on the 2020-21 Budget.

In their briefing to the Committee for the Economy, officials indicated that there may be elements of the departmental budget, and those of its arm's-length bodies, that can be repurposed for the COVID-19 response. Again, that makes scrutiny at this point difficult.

The Committee is very supportive of the Department's COVID-19 response to date and is advising the Department on gaps in schemes and other issues through extensive consultation with its stakeholder network.

The Committee cannot make a definitive judgement on the Department for the Economy's 2020-21 budget plans at this stage because of the issues that I have outlined. However, members stand ready to scrutinise the Department's budget as and when there is greater detail and certainty. The Committee has already raised the issue of the need for sign-off on the graduate medical school at Magee project before the end of May, as per the General Medical Council's requirement for opening in the academic year 2020-21. Members support the required funding being made available by the Executive once the project receives timely sign-off.

As a key driver of the COVID-19 response, the Department for the Economy must have its budgetary needs prioritised. The Committee looks forward to the outcome of the June monitoring round to better assess where the Department's budget position sits. The Committee has concerns about the other work that is a vital part of the Department's remit: the response to Brexit and the impact of the protocol; dealing with the RHI inquiry response; and strategies across a range of policy areas that include energy, tourism, further and higher education and skills. Additionally, the Department has a number of actions that come from 'New Decade, New Approach'.

While it is not possible at this point to make definitive statements or scrutiny points on the Department's budget, the Committee remains ready to offer advice and guidance to the Minister in the challenging days ahead. Members are cognisant of the fact that considerable resources will be needed to get the economy back on its feet and to begin to build the recovery. The Committee is united in its view that, at present, this is, first and foremost, a health crisis and the Budget must be deployed appropriately in response. For now, the Committee for the Economy is forced to reserve its position, as this is not a normal Budget process.

I will, now, make some remarks in support of the motion in my capacity as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. The current priority for us all is to deal with COVID-19 and its impact. The restrictions that have been put in place have severe economic consequences, but they have been necessary to save as many lives as possible. As we plan for the recovery, that remains our aim: to save lives. We need a phased return to business that keeps the spread of the virus under control, because lifting the restrictions too quickly and allowing the virus to spread could lead to further lockdowns that would cause even greater economic damage.

The £510 million that the Finance Minister has directed towards supporting businesses to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 so far has been most welcome. It has comprised £370 million for grant schemes, £100 million to date for the rates holiday and a further £40 million towards a hardship scheme to support those who have missed out on other support that, we hope, will be announced soon,

along with support for others who have not yet received any funding.

The growth deals and city deals funding that was announced yesterday for regions across the North are also very welcome. I thank the Minister for his work on those. They will be very important in the years ahead. However, I think that we all recognise that there will be a need for further targeted support and that the British Government will have to invest further to support the economic recovery. As we look forward to planning for the recovery, there needs to be debate and discussion about the type of economy and society that we want, as we come out of the pandemic: an economy that recognises the vital role of the healthcare and other key workers who have stepped up to the plate to ensure that essential services continue to be delivered, many in roles that the British Home Secretary deemed to be "unskilled" not so long ago; an economy that upholds workers' rights, where zero-hour contracts and bogus self-employment are things of the past and agency workers enjoy the same rights as other employees; an economy that encourages entrepreneurship, where businesses can thrive; and an economy with decarbonisation as a core tenet that harnesses the potential of natural resources through a green new deal.

Prior to the pandemic, hospitality, tourism, manufacturing and many other sectors were thriving. Social enterprises and cooperatives were doing brilliant work in communities. They will need support and guidance to return to doing what they do best. While some sectors have ground to a halt, others, such as the digital economy, cybersecurity and delivery services, have had to expand rapidly to support new working arrangements. In planning for the recovery, we should seek to develop the sectors that have high-value growth potential. That will require investment in digital infrastructure, skills development and innovation through research funding but will have great benefits.

For the second time in little over a decade, an economic crisis is likely to result in high youth unemployment. We need to be prepared to respond to that and ensure that young people have alternative pathways to develop their skills or learn on the job in new industries.

An all-island approach to the recovery is the only sensible option. Coordinating a response, benefiting from our interconnected supply chains and building on our strengths just makes sense.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Dr Archibald: The challenge facing us is great, but our response must be one that tackles inequality and builds resilience to future pandemics like this one.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I welcome the opportunity to speak as Chairman of the Committee for Justice in the debate.

The Budget announced by the Minister of Finance on 31 March 2020 included allocations of £1,111.2 million resource DEL and £88.1 million capital for the Department of Justice. The Budget document noted that that was an increase of 6.3% on the 2019-2020 resource DEL allocation. However, the Department has advised that it includes funding for a number of matters, such as £5

million of ring-fenced funding for legacy pressures and PSNI security funding. When you remove such costs and compare like with like, it equates to an increase of just 2.5% on the 2019-2020 resource DEL. The Department has advised that the allocation is not adequate to maintain current services, and the Minister of Justice has raised her concerns with the Minister of Finance. Overall, staff costs account for over two thirds of the Department's resource expenditure, and the major portion of resource funding — 72% — is allocated to its non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs). That includes the Police Service, which alone will receive over £785 million, including security funding. The Department's agencies account for 23% of expenditure, whilst 5% will be allocated to the core department. The Police Service will also receive the highest capital allocation — nearly £60 million — while the Prison Service has been allocated just under £17 million and the Court Service will receive nearly £7 million.

With regard to COVID-19, the Committee was mindful that the Department's planning took place before the COVID-19 crisis materialised. Members recognise that the pandemic is likely to have a significant impact on the delivery of services across the justice sector that may not be fully realised for some time. The Committee also understands that there is regular engagement with the Department of Finance on COVID-19-related costs. The Department of Justice had earlier indicated costs in the region of £38.8 million and received allocations of £4 million for the Police Service and £1.9 million for the Prison Service.

It is the Committee's view that there will be programmes and projects that had been planned before the crisis began to unfold that will now not continue or be initiated as anticipated. That could free up resources for reallocation to meet urgent COVID-19 resource requirements. The bid submitted to the Department of Finance appears to have been made without evaluating or taking account of the likely reduction in business activity to identify what predicted expenditure could be reprofiled or surrendered. The Department has advised that it intends to undertake work in the coming weeks to assess the impact of COVID-19. The Committee believes that that is critical to providing an accurate picture of the resources available in the Department to manage the crisis and determine whether additional funding is required from the centre.

I will leave aside the COVID-19 pandemic for now. The Department has advised of inescapable pressures of £67.3 million just to stand still. Of that, £31.8 million relates to police operational pressures, £17 million for inflationary pay and price increases, £1.5 million for transformational initiatives and £14.5 million for operational pressures, including costs arising from court cases and routine legal aid payments. The Committee has asked the Department to provide further information on services or activities that could be reduced or ceased and the impact that that might have, particularly given the assertion that the resource DEL budget falls short of what is required to maintain current services.

The Department also set out a range of matters that it identifies as other significant pressures. They include EU exit costs, legacy and the impact of the BEAR Scotland case with regard to the calculation of overtime pay, which is particularly relevant to the Police Service. Regrettably, the Department has not provided indicative costs, citing uncertainty around timing and scale. However, the

Committee believes that some of the information must be known. For example, the police provided an estimate of inescapable legacy-related pressures to the Department, but they were not included in the £31.8 million inescapable pressure attributed to the police that I mentioned earlier. The Department has also advised that costs for these matters are expected to be so significant that they could not be managed within budget and additional funding would be sought from the centre. That suggests that there must be some indication of what the costs might be.

Funding of £10.7 million was allocated towards the costs of exiting the EU. The Department has advised that that is only a small proportion of the total estimated pressure but, again, has failed to provide an indication of what that pressure might be. The reason the Committee has been given for the absence of the detail is that planning for 2019-2020 was mostly done on the basis of no deal, which is no longer relevant, and that requirements will be informed as the implications of the exit protocol become clearer over the coming months. The Committee expects to be kept up to date.

Similarly, on New Decade, New Approach, no costs were provided. Unfortunately, the Committee is again unhappy with the Department of Justice at its failure to provide that information to the Committee.

Mindful of the time, I have highlighted a range of areas where the Committee did not get the figures from the Department. The Department subsequently went to the Department of Finance and to the Minister to seek additional funding, without having done its internal housekeeping work. I do not believe and the Committee does not believe that it is acceptable for the Minister of Justice to fail in that way in her Department. It is unfair on the Minister of Finance to be faced with requests from the Minister of Justice when that Department has not carried out the work in its Department. It is incumbent on the Minister of Justice to do her job and to carry out the necessary work before going back to the Department of Finance to seek additional funding. I say that outside of being Chairman of the Committee as well. It is totally unreasonable for the Minister of Finance to receive such requests when Ministers need to evaluate their own priorities on the basis of the situation that they face.

I will make some brief comments as an individual MLA in the last 20 seconds that are available. We are in the calm before the storm. We face significant business problems, including closures and high unemployment levels, and we will face an economic crisis —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Givan: — that requires this Budget and future Budgets to prioritise support for our economy.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Ba mhaith liom sonraí a thabhairt don Tionól faoin dianscrúdú a rinne an Coiste Sláinte ar Bhuiséad 2020-21. I rise to provide the House with details of the Health Committee's scrutiny of the 2020-21 Budget. Ba mhaith liom, ar dtús, aitheantas a thabhairt don chóras cúraim sláinte atá faoi bhrú millteanach faoi láthair, ó na cúramóirí go dtí an fhoireann leighis ar an líne thosaigh, agus na hoifigh atá ag obair faoi stiúir an Aire. First, I acknowledge the enormous pressure under which the health and social care system is working, from care workers and medical

staff at the front line through to officials, led by the Minister. I understand that the fast-moving situation makes it impossible to provide certainty on spending and service provision in the months ahead. The pre-existing financial, waiting list and transformation challenges are impeded and yet made more urgent by the threat to life from COVID-19, which, the Committee recognises, as you have stated, Minister, is an unprecedented crisis.

In summary, the Health Committee has been advised that, as things stand, the Department of Health has been provided with an uplift of £399 million compared with its opening baseline last year. However, given in-year allocations, that, while welcome, amounts to a 4.7% increase on its forecast spending. That allocation falls short of the Department's estimated requirements. There is no money to meet New Decade, New Approach commitments. The transformation budget will be so small that some existing projects will have to be cancelled or paused, and there remains a further funding gap, which means that choices may have to be made between some bare-minimum inescapable pressures. Indeed, it could be worse: the calculated funding gap is based on assumptions that the trusts can carry on meeting standards while achieving further savings. Members will, no doubt, share my concerns at that picture.

Owing to the compressed timescale and the late arrival of papers, the Committee did not come to a formal position on the Budget but raised the following matters. The Department estimates that it requires £169 million to meet the health and care commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach', including progress on transformation, further provision of IVF treatment, dealing with excessive waiting times for elective care, the reform of adult social care, upgrading palliative care services and developing a new mental health strategy. For many, the disappointment that there is no funding as yet is all the worse for having had their hopes raised. I know that you, Minister, continue to press the British Government to honour their commitments as set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

We are all agreed that transformation is essential to deal with rising costs. It is a priority agreed across the Executive and, indeed, reiterated in 'NDNA'. While initially allocating £81 million to fund a standstill approach to transformation, the Department has agreed to divert some of that resource to deal with the underfunding of other inescapable pressures, leaving only £44 million this year available to maintain some but not all projects. Nevertheless, it represents not much more than a third of last year's spending and is well short of this year's budget, which is a real concern.

In terms of the funding gap and scaling back transformation, there remains a funding gap of about £34 million to meet inescapable pressures. However, that £34 million gap assumes the achievement of £72 million of savings and that last year's target of £77 million will prove deliverable on a recurrent basis. However, as officials admit in their briefing to us, that is a risky assumption. Officials advise that the Department expects trusts to make the 1% savings in a low-impact manner through efficiencies. We have further work to do to get to the heart of that. We will apply oversight and accountability to explore whether savings are genuinely achieved through more efficient ways of working or, for example, by failing to replace a retiring member of staff.

In relation to COVID-19, the Department updated the Committee on its assessment of costs, which could run to upwards of £500 million. That is significantly more than has been received to date; however, they have advised us of a degree of confidence that pandemic costs would be met.

In terms of in-year issues, while allocations are, no doubt, hugely welcome, particularly at this time, Members will appreciate that that is not conducive to long-term planning, which is crucial to transformation and to our charity and community sectors.

There is concerning evidence of growing financial strain in the health and social care system and little opportunity to make the progress needed to address those strains, due to COVID-19 as well as ongoing financial pressures. The Committee will continue to monitor the situation and engage constructively as matters progress.

I would now like to add some remarks as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. I welcome the speedy resolution of the pay issue at the start of your tenure, Minister, in relation to our Health and Social Care staff. It reminds us how vital it was in demonstrating how we value our Health and Social Care staff. I am struck by how quickly that became obvious when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The pressures brought on by 10 years of austerity have come into sharp focus since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, with shortages of personnel and equipment impacting on our ability to meet the challenge head-on. Ahead of us, we face the uncertainty of a Brexit that we did not vote for and its impact on our already shattered health and public services. The COVID-19 crisis has challenged our health and social care system in unprecedented ways. It highlighted the ravages of 10 years of Tory austerity, when we sought to locate suitable PPE, ventilators and the staff we needed to face the challenge head-on to save the lives of our people. It has also demonstrated the need for deeper and wider cooperation in the provision of health services across this island to protect all our people. The Minister of Finance has tried to alleviate the worst effects of COVID-19. We also need to resource the charity and community sectors and to work with them to ensure that we address social care and protection for the most vulnerable in our society.

Faoi dheireadh, a LeasCheann Comhairle, ní mór dúinn cosaint a thabhairt dár gcóras sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta. Caithfidimid iad a fhorbairt chomh maith. It is essential that we protect and promote the need to transform our health and social care systems. It will require proper planning, implementation and resourcing in the time ahead. We must grasp that nettle collectively to make the changes that we need for our community.

Mr McCrossan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): Can I follow on from my colleagues and other Members in paying tribute to our dear friend and colleague, John Dallat? His death came as a tremendous shock to us all today. Even though he had been unwell, it still came as a shock that he has gone so quickly.

John was elected to the House for 22 years. He spent 45 years of his life as a public servant. He showed an unbelievable dedication and commitment to the public, and he was a fierce champion of public funds. He was a man who chased every pound and accounted for every penny when it came to his accountable role on the Public Accounts Committee.

3.45 pm

John loved his family, the SDLP and the people of East Derry. To finish, with your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, John had a tough and ballsy exterior, but underneath he was a soft, gentle, kind man and someone who had a great sense of humour. Before I stood to speak, I was thinking about the last time that John stood with me in the Chamber. It was when he stood just behind me and paid a heartfelt tribute to Séamus Mallon on his death. This place will certainly be a lot sadder for the loss of a great man — a man who gave his life to so many.

I will speak now as the Chair of the Audit Committee to reflect the scrutiny of the Budget 2020-21 for the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. The Committee's agreed report on its deliberations was published on 5 March, and a debate on the Assembly Commission's budget, specifically, took place in the Chamber on 16 March. The Committee's evidence-gathering took place over two meetings on 13 February and 4 March 2020. All evidence gathered has been published as part of the Committee's report. With the limited time available to me today, I cannot dwell on the detail of the evidence gathered by the Committee, but I will reflect on particular areas, the first of which relates to the Assembly Commission.

It is clear that a large part of the Assembly's Budget is driven by costs set out in the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination 2016. The Commission is legally obliged to meet those costs, but members questioned officials on the controllable proportion of the Commission's budget. Elements include income-generation options, staffing implications of a fully functioning Assembly, the Commission's capital budget and staff resources. Members also noted the anticipated financial implications of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, some of which are still uncertain. That will, no doubt, be a focus for the Assembly Commission and an area of future scrutiny for the Committee.

Members were satisfied with the detail presented during its evidence session, but there is a clear need to have more than one opportunity to examine the Commission's budget. It was also noted that the scrutiny role of the Audit Committee in that regard needs to be codified.

I move now to the Audit Office. Members questioned officials on the new business model and the transformation work undertaken in recent times. Members were pleased to see the amount of budget reductions that the office has been able to make in that regard and received a number of assurances from officials that they had not had a detrimental impact on the work outputs of the office.

Despite having a relatively small budget, members of the Committee were struck by the wide remit of NIPSO, as well as the growing numbers of complaints considered by the office since its inception in 2016. Members were particularly interested to hear about the future role of the office in relation to the complaints standards authority. That, combined with investment in other preventative measures outlined, could lead to huge savings further down the line due to a reduction in the number of complaints finding their way to NIPSO in the first place. The Committee also looks forward to a timely appointment

of a permanent ombudsman, given that the powers of the acting Ombudsman will expire in July of this year.

The Committee would be supportive of a multi-year budgetary framework in the future as it would enable a more strategic budgetary focus. The Committee would also encourage maximum focus on income-generation opportunities. As such, the Department of Finance's Budget document has made provision for the figures agreed by the Committee in its report published on 5 March 2020.

I will now make comments as the SDLP's education spokesperson, and as an MLA for West Tyrone. I thank the Executive and Members present for showing a collective front in tackling what has been one of the most serious global public health issues in our lifetime. I pay tribute to our front-line staff, health workers and front-line workers in the community. I also mention Pat McManus, who sadly lost his life. He was a Strabane man who moved to England, some years ago, and was a front-line health worker. He was the first person from Northern Ireland to sadly lose their life.

Turning to the education budget, it remains concerning that all additional pressures in the education budget will not be met in this Budget or a future Budget. Taking existing allocations in addition to COVID-19 support, the Department's budget is still £165 million short, and there are no indications as to where the shortfall will impact. The SDLP has major areas of concern about education, including fair pay for teachers, special educational needs, school budget pressures. The list goes on. Those are all pressures that have to be met if we are to ensure that our education system is properly delivering for all our children and that no child falls between the gaps. Pre-COVID-19, our schools system was crippling at its very knees, and, unless proper action is taken, that will continue to be the case when this pandemic is over and our schools reopen.

I am very tight for time, but I would like to touch on the issue of supply teachers. We have ended the long-running discrimination around teachers' pay, but, as one ends, another begins because supply teachers have been left out in the cold in relation to COVID-19. There is no sign of any funding, although we have heard commitments from the Department of Education that it has made a bid for the £12 million required. Those teachers have livelihoods, houses to pay for and bills to pay. They are very concerned and there needs to be provision for them.

I will throw the A5 in as a one-liner because everyone knows that I have to mention it.

To conclude my remarks today, we are in uncharted waters. This is a testing time for the Government and the Executive. It is vital that the parties around the table, particularly the larger two, pull together in one direction. Stop stamping on each other's toes and do whatever possible to protect our people, to save lives and to help society recover from COVID-19.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr McCrossan: The Assembly and its survival is more crucial than ever before, and we must work together to ensure that we get through this together.

Mr Chambers: I rise today as the health spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. This would have been a difficult

Budget to align under any normal circumstances, so with the ongoing challenge of COVID, the actual end-of-year Budget report will, in all likelihood, look very different from what is being discussed today.

Given the immediate demands and pressures at hand, it was perhaps understandable that the Budget did not include the costs associated with the current response to COVID-19. However, the urgency of the situation must not mean that public money is spent in an ineffective manner. In the weeks and months after the current crisis, there will be time to review how the Executive spent their COVID allocations, but, for the time being, their focus must absolutely remain on saving lives.

Whilst recognising that we are in the midst of the biggest public health emergency in the history of Northern Ireland, we must also remember that much of the day-to-day work of the health service has to continue. People are still having strokes and cardiac arrests, women are still giving birth and all our health workers, more than ever before, need and deserve their pay. They earn every penny.

With an ageing population, with increasing complexities, co-morbidities and medications, it is little wonder that this year's forecast expenditure needed to increase by 6% just to maintain existing services. It is welcome that the health service was to receive an additional £399.6 million. However, that included £170 million for the Agenda for Change pay deal that had already been committed to by the Executive. The Department stated clearly that it needed £492 million as an absolute minimum just to meet inescapable costs. With that allocation, it means that the health service was facing an immediate funding shortfall of £92 million. As a result of the shortfall in funding, unfortunately, the Department may find itself in a position of having no choice but to use money that had been earmarked for transformation instead. Transformation is key, yet this Budget sadly did not acknowledge that.

When all this is over and done, our waiting times, which were already by far the worst in the UK, will be even more frightening. The Executive have broadly done the right thing in recent weeks by giving the Department of Health the money it needed to support care homes to pay for the thousands of staff coming on to the payroll and to protect essential services such as community pharmacies. However, all parties must recognise that the cost of repairing the psychological and physical damage of this virus will demand serious attention and serious resource for years to come. People who needed an operation on their hip before COVID-19 will still require it after COVID-19.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can I ask Members to be careful with their microphones. They are picking up some interference. The microphones are picking up interference. If you can just be careful.

Mr Chambers: Sorry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): OK. Continue.

Mr Chambers: The end of this pandemic will end one major challenge for our Health Ministry, but will reopen another major challenge to address waiting lists that will, as I have said, undoubtedly be higher than when Minister Swann came into office in January. I will quote the Health Minister, Robin Swann. When he spoke in this Chamber last week, he said:

"Let us resolve to do better for the health service, which has stood so firmly by us. Let us fund it properly in the long term and transform it for the better. Let that be one of the lasting legacies of the period that we are living through. Let that be the true and lasting tribute to those whom we applaud every Thursday night."

In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker, I place on record the appreciation that we owe the Treasury in London for the major additional funds that it has made available to the Executive to tackle the current health crisis and to help mitigate its economic impact on our citizens and businesses. If we ever needed reminding of the practical benefits of being part of the United Kingdom, this crisis has provided it.

Mr Frew: I support the Budget, knowing that what we are actually debating here — the facts and figures and the numbers in front of us — is not really a true reflection of what the Budget will be. In that sense, whilst it is useful to put our concerns, queries, wishes and wants on the record in Hansard, we do so with the caveat that, given the crisis that we are in, the Budget will probably be completely different by the end of the financial year. I also realise that the slow cogs of government turn at a different pace than the emergency dictates, and that is why most of the Barnett consequentials have been left out and are on a different page, if you like.

Therefore, I come with the knowledge that we are in unprecedented times and that things are very fast moving. It has been difficult for a lot of the Departments, not least the Finance Department, to manage, cope with and get to grips with the crisis. However, some Departments have handled it better than others. Some have had more of a burden than others, and some have had to learn more quickly than others. Some, if you like, have not really been affected, and some have been at the heart of the battle. Therefore, that should be reflected in any Budget settlement that we can produce, and that is where I worry.

I worry that we have the capacity and the ability to actually think strategically. Thank goodness, as many Members have said here, for the Barnett consequentials and the benefits of being in a strong union, with the financial power and weight that it brings. Of course, money was floating down, nearly on a daily basis, to help us and the Executive to formulate plans, some of which we mirrored from GB and some, then, we have taken upon ourselves because things are different, and that is fine as long as we have a strategic vision and plan.

I am worried. Whilst the original Barnett consequential float-down of £120 million went directly to provide a three-month rates holiday, I do worry that we have not yet been able to expand on that. The rates that we bring in make up a very small percentage of our income, but for some businesses, especially in this day and age, the rates holiday will mean everything.

Remember, businesses were affected by the revaluation in the first place, and there was a massive change in some quarters. They were struggling and wondering how they were going to see it through. Now, they have been hit with COVID-19. Some of those businesses are in a very difficult place.

4.00 pm

I appeal to the Minister, the Department and, by extension, the Executive to think strategically about how we can provide the best support to our businesses. In some cases, it will be throwing money at them, but, in many others, it will be about ensuring that the financial burden that is placed on them going forward is not too great. When you look at the small percentage of our rates payout, what we receive compared to our overall income, it does not compare to what businesses have to deal with in their budgetary positions. Rates could be the final straw and, if it is not rates, it could be something else. Let us try to support those businesses as best we can by not placing a burden on them.

With the Minister's statements so far this financial year, it is clear that he has added flexibility to the system. That is good. It is well and good for Departments to be able to move money about and move money into the centre and one thing and another. It is essential that that takes place. However, have I yet seen a strategic vision or a plan? No, I do not think that I have. Of course, when we were speaking in the Budget debates, which were before the COVID-19 emergency, many of us asked, "Where is the vision? Where will we do things differently? What about investment in infrastructure? What about bringing in an age of decisionism? What about aligning the Budget with an outcomes-based Programme for Government?". Now, we ask what about major recovery plans for businesses that have been affected by COVID-19? What about mitigation measures for our community? What about — it has also been raised today — our ageing housing stock? Those were issues and emergencies before the current emergency took hold, but have we dealt with them? No, we have not — not according to this Budget.

I worry about the future. Do we have the capacity to get us out the other side of the emergency and win the war, and then win the peace given the outlying issues that have always been there and that we have not been able to grapple with and fix up to this point? The water infrastructure and the energy issue. They are all sitting there buzzing away waiting to be fixed, and they are not being fixed. That will hurt people in recovering and getting through this — even if we get through the health emergency and make some kind of economic recovery, those burdens will still lie with us, and we will still not have resolved them. I worry about that.

I have some queries about the actual detail of the Budget. I can understand the uplift, the percentage change, in most of the Departments. It does not seem to be that strategic and just seems to be a layering up of the big beast Departments, while giving a lesser amount to the smaller Departments.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Frew: One thing that strikes me is the 72.4 % jump for the Executive Office. I take it that that is the £37.5 million for the implementation of the historical institutional abuse scheme, but the Minister could clarify that for me.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: Thank you very much.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I would

like to begin by also expressing my condolences to the family of John Dallat on his sad passing. I knew John from back in the days of the Committee for Regional Development. Recently, he was a member of the AERA Committee and was replaced by Pat Catney. He was a dedicated public representative and very effective in his roles as a legislator and a scrutiniser of public policy. In recent times, I noted that, even when he was visibly ill and weakening, he was still as sharp as a razor in, perhaps, spotting salient points or small pieces of detail in a raft of documents. He will be badly missed here, by his party and, most of all, by his loving family.

I will now speak in my capacity as the Chairperson of the AERA Committee. In February, the Committee began its engagement with the Department on its budget requirements for the year 2020-21. As we know, in light of the COVID crisis, the situation in mid-February was very different from the one that we have now.

The first matter that I want to draw attention to is the funding of direct payments to farmers. Previously, that had been done via CAP pillar 1, which involved funding coming from the EU to Westminster and then on to the four regions. The method of distribution between the four regions, including that it should be ring-fenced, is well established and it has been in place for some time. The Committee welcomes the fact that £293 million has been secured for 2020-21, but it has concerns about what will replace the funding of the basic payment, and what form it will take in future years.

The Bew Review made recommendations regarding the farm support budget, 2020-22. That may see us with reduced amounts of funding for farm support, and that is a major area of concern for the farming and wider rural community, particularly in the current situation, with many of our food producers facing a financial crisis as a result of COVID-19.

The Committee explored the possibility of farm support schemes and an area of natural constraint (ANC) scheme. A motion was passed in this Chamber regarding that. We noted that, in the 2019-20 financial year, DAERA had reduced resource requirements of £12 million. We asked questions regarding the possibility of using that underspend for a future ANC scheme. DAERA responded that the reduced requirements do not become firmed up until the last monitoring round of the financial year, and that all reduced requirements over £1 million must be automatically surrendered at the earliest opportunity. Thus the time frame for identification and surrender meant that it was not possible to deliver a farm support ANC scheme.

Related to replacement funding for CAP pillar 1, are the Committee's concerns on replacement funding for the rural development programme (RDP), that currently derives largely from CAP pillar 2. Some £10.8 million of non-ring-fenced funding is set aside for the RDP, specifically for LEADER and forestry. This is to continue, with schemes such as the rural business investment scheme, rural basic services and village renewal, and that is welcomed by the Committee.

A further £6.3 million has been set aside under capital for the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) and rural tourism, and £9.7 million for the farm business improvement schemes. The EFS funding would allow for the roll-out of the next tranche of that programme,

which brings environmental benefits to farms. Members have considered the EFS previously and noted that the rates of subsidies should be reviewed in order to maximise environmental sustainability, and that they are economically sustainable for, and attractive to, farmers.

We were also pleased to see that the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme will receive £2.5 million of resource funding, again non-ring-fenced. It will support rural community development and cohesion, particularly welcome at this difficult time.

In the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, we welcome the £3 million of capital for TRPSI. That is to be used for community facilities, fuel poverty and rural transport. The £7 million, secured under the Rural Business Community Fund to replace the current EU priority 6 element, is also welcome.

We are aware that COVID-19 is having a deep impact on rural areas, many of which are isolated from essential services, such as food shops and medical centres. It has underlined the need for reliable and fast broadband provision. Patchy broadband provision in some areas is therefore worrying. To that end, the Committee noted and welcomed that £7.5 million of capital funding is set aside for Project Stratum. The Committee also welcomes the support that the DAERA rural affairs division provides to a range of statutory, community and voluntary groups to provide support in rural areas during this COVID-19 crisis.

Rural development is largely funded from CAP pillar 2 and other EU sources, and it is intended that its replacement will come from the Shared Prosperity Fund. However, we are very concerned that we have no clarity as regards the details of the Shared Prosperity Fund policy. We are not aware of a guarantee that such replacement funding will be ring-fenced. This is creating a degree of concern and uncertainty about the future for rural communities funding. The Committee has serious concerns about the lack of clarity and information on the future Shared Prosperity Fund.

The Committee is also pleased to see that £2.2 million has been allocated for staff to deliver the new climate change legislation, as well as a scoping study for the independent environmental protection agency and the light detection and ranging (LiDAR) study. In connection with the independent environmental protection agency, the Committee draws attention to the Environment Bill that is currently making its way through Westminster. Large parts of the Bill apply to here, in particular the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP). We are still concerned about the lack of clarity on the role of the OEP, and how it will interact with the NIEA here.

The Committee also noted that the COVID-19 crisis means that it is likely that there will be delays to the roll-out of many projects. That means that consideration is being given to the reallocation of resources to meet the current emergency as part of June monitoring.

The Committee also has many concerns on the EU exit. The Brexit budget allocated to the Department for 2019-2020 was not included in its baseline; it is additional money that the Department must bid for year-on-year. The Committee noted that £23.6 million of non ring-fenced resource has been allocated for EU exit costs.

I want to jump on very quickly. One of the biggest concerns that we have is the agri-food sector, which has taken the biggest hit during the COVID-19 crisis. Farmers are our primary food producers, and they are facing an unprecedented crisis. A bid has been made to Westminster and the EU for a £105 million package. That is really important at this time because the measures for the self-employed do not apply to the agri-food industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr McAleer: I conclude by calling for support for the agri-food industry and our farming and rural communities at this very difficult time.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement and rise to speak on a Budget that has been set in what are unprecedented and uncertain times in the history of this place. Nobody in this Chamber can say with any confidence what the future may hold, with Departments already burning through cash so quickly that another Vote on Account will soon be required to release more money to spend, just over a mere month since the start of the financial year.

We are, therefore, being asked to vote upon what could best be described as a "blindfold Budget" without any clear view of what the year ahead may bring. Many issues contribute to the uncertainty, whether they are a result of COVID-19 and the lack of hard evidence on how successful loosening the lockdown will be in keeping R under one, or the risk of a no deal Brexit as a result of the failure to positively conclude trade negotiations and a refusal to request an extension. The ability of our health service to deal with a potentially colossal surge in non COVID-19 waiting lists is also a real concern; something my colleague Paula Bradshaw will speak about later.

Coming back after a three-year political hiatus, the Assembly was already facing significant financial challenges due to key decisions having been deferred for years, year-on-year funding cuts due to the politics of austerity and the failure of the UK Government to honour the financial commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Setting a Budget was already going to be tough before COVID-19 arrived. A quick review of the bids for additional funding from Departments due to COVID-19 versus the moneys available from additional Barnett consequentials and the allocations made to date make sobering reading and point to a financial crisis of unparalleled measure if further and extremely substantial Barnett consequentials are not forthcoming.

The welcome decision to provide increased flexibility to ensure that essential front-line public services can continue will help. However, without additional funding, a way needs to be found to ensure that Executive Departments can continue to operate on a sound financial basis, not just now but throughout and until the end of the year to ensure that front-line public services continue to be delivered by workers who must be properly and fairly paid.

Access to the UK reserves by the devolved Administrations for COVID-19 related reasons, which was announced by the Chancellor on 11 March, is welcome, but we have not yet received any indication from the Executive or the Department of Finance on whether they intend to use that power and what options could be utilised to repay the moneys obtained as a result. I would therefore

be most grateful if the Minister could detail more in relation to whether that is being considered and whether the Executive are prepared to consider utilising their limited borrowing powers to safeguard businesses and stimulate economic recovery, recognising how vital it is that the Northern Ireland Executive do all that they can to protect jobs and livelihoods. A well-thought-out stimulus plan and targeted investment could be the difference between a short recession and a long depression, and the livelihoods of thousands of citizens depend upon that.

All Departments need to be part of that, with capital and resource spending critical, including the maximum possible utilisation of financial transactions capital to aid our construction sector.

4.15 pm

Regardless of whether the Chancellor realises the need to fund the recovery on the same basis as the interventions made to date, the need for us to face up to and make difficult decisions and reform the way in which our public services are delivered will not go away. In fact, in the light of the major financial challenges being endured and the colossal changes inevitable as a result of the pandemic, we simply cannot afford not to take the tough decisions, many of which have been around for decades. There is simply no more road to kick the can down. Whether it is tackling the cost of division, implementing Bengoa, implementing the recommendations arising from the independent review of education, the mutualisation of Northern Ireland Water or delivering modern working practices fit for 2020, the failure to face up to hard and potentially unpopular decisions just is not an option any more. COVID-19 provides more, not less, reason to urgently reform our public services.

At this point, before I touch on my other brief as my party's infrastructure spokesperson, I declare that I was previously an employee of Translink.

While COVID-19 will eventually pass, the need to tackle climate change and avert catastrophe will not. Our way out of lockdown and the pandemic must be via a well-funded, green recovery, not towards even more cars choking up our streets and polluting our atmosphere. The Department for Infrastructure will play a vital role in ensuring that, but, to date, it has failed to be allocated sufficient funds from COVID-19 moneys, apart from £90 million set aside for ferries, airports and logistics. I recognise and welcome the previous commitments given by the Finance Minister to provide necessary funding, but, for the Department to plan ahead, those promises soon need to materialise. It is not sufficient for the Department of Finance merely to state that DFI should reprioritise existing budgets to address pressures emerging due to COVID-19. The financial implications of the way we will have to travel, the downturn, non-domestic water charges, reduced planning fees and charges levied by DVA cannot be funded within existing budgets.

I hope that the Finance Minister will elaborate on what he will be able to do to aid the provision of quality infrastructure and on the other points that I have raised. I thank the officials for all the work they have done over the past number of weeks in extremely challenging circumstances.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We are due to change the personnel at the Table, and it has been a long debate already. I propose that we take a short comfort break for everyone's benefit. By leave of the Assembly, I will suspend the sitting until 4:35 pm. The first person to speak when we return will be Pam Cameron. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 4.18 pm and resumed at 4.35 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair) —

Mrs Cameron: I put on record my condolences to the family, friends and, indeed, colleagues of John Dallat at this very sad time. It is a difficult time for anyone to grieve. In these circumstances, I know that we are all thinking of his family and his colleagues.

As DUP spokesperson and as a member of the Health Committee, I will make some brief remarks about the allocations to the Department of Health. If ever there was a time when the need to fund our health service was evident, it is surely now. We must resource our NHS to make it fit to tackle any crisis that comes our way, such as COVID-19, but we must also ensure that the daily needs of those ill and suffering across Northern Ireland are met. We must also focus on adequately resourcing the most valuable asset in our health service: our staff. Let the House never again see nurses on strike to bring about a fair pay settlement. Resourcing comes in two areas: staff resourcing and equipping the estate. The Budget does that. While we would all want more, we work within finite resources, where prioritisation is fundamental to the best outcomes possible from the funding envelope available.

For the resource budget, we are talking astronomical sums of money. An extra £400 million is needed next year, and we have inescapable pressures arising from 'New Decade, New Approach' around nursing and midwifery training, safe staffing and transformation. Transformation is vital to the continued effectiveness of our local NHS. For it to be planned effectively, we need to move towards a multi-year Budget, providing clarity over time to plan change in a more strategic way. We also need to have clarity around the £72 million savings target. Is that realistic, given the pressures from COVID-19? If it is not, where is the revised target? For capital spend, we really need the longer-term strategic approach that comes with multi-year Budgets. We also need clarity on the status of the capital projects pre-committed to, not least the mother-and-baby unit. We think of Bengoa and the reform of our health service, including its estate, and we need progress on that to be made sooner rather than later if budgeting is truly to make the best use of the money that is available.

There can be no underestimating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our health service and its budgets. Next year's Budget will be dominated by COVID-19 and the response to it, and that is right. Of course, the money, sadly, is very much needed. We will have to see how the additional costs are met. We will also have to assess how the suspension of other services has produced savings elsewhere in our healthcare system. Those are issues for investigation on another day, perhaps, but they are challenges coming down the track towards us and challenges that we cannot dodge or delay indefinitely. The bottom line is that, moving forward, we need more

money. In that regard, we must get clarity from our Government and the Government of the Irish Republic on the commitments made in 'New Decade, New Approach'. We must also push ahead with transformation at pace. Most importantly, to succeed, we need to be able to plan on a multi-year basis.

Ms Mullan: I also send my condolences to John Dallat's family and his SDLP colleagues. Our thoughts are with you all.

I thank the Minister for his statement. Today, as the Sinn Féin education spokesperson, I welcome the news that the Department of Education has received an 11% increase on last year in its resource budget. That is the first significant increase in its budget for 10 years. It is a step towards addressing the huge shortfall in the system that came about as a consequence of a decade of Tory policy. The increase in funding for the Department has also made it possible to make a long-awaited pay award to our teachers, and I commend all involved in making that happen.

The onset of COVID-19 has brought with it much tragedy and uncertainty. At this stage, however, I pay tribute to our teaching and non-teaching staff, our youth and childcare services and the wider education sector for how they have adapted in order to continue to deliver educational, youth and childcare services. Like every other Department, the Department of Education has had to make changes to its initial budget plans and bid for extra resources to deal with the emergency that we find ourselves in.

Last week, the Education Committee had a budget briefing from departmental officials and was informed of some of the changes and the ongoing bids. I welcome that proactive approach and ask the Education Minister to do all that he can to make the necessary funding available to support our day-to-day substitute teachers, who have been without an income since the crisis began.

The Finance Minister's announcement of at least £227 million of additional funding for the Department of Education is hugely welcome and should be commended. That funding boost is, hopefully, the beginning of the turning of the tide in the crisis of school budgets. Our school leaders need to be able to prepare and plan in the confidence that they have the resources that they require to deliver for their pupils.

It is also welcome news that over £40 million has been made available for special education needs provision. In recent years, special education has been starved of resources and investment. The Education Authority has consistently exceeded its SEN budget, which highlights the shortfall in the funding that was going to SEN provision. I am hopeful that the additional funding announced by Minister Murphy will help to address some of those difficulties and alleviate some of the other pressures facing children with special education needs and their families.

In a short time and in difficult circumstances, the Finance Minister has not only delivered a much-needed increase in the Department of Education's budget but made real-terms increases to all Executive budgets. As the Finance Minister stated, the block grant to the North is still lower than it was prior to austerity, which means that pressures will continue. With those pressures in mind, it is important that we get our priorities straight. We must deliver on the basis of objective need. An area of work that I am keen to see progressed is closing the attainment gap between

our most disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers. In that context, we must seek to ensure a culture of collaboration, joined-up thinking and working across the Executive. Departments should be able to and should be encouraged to share costs in order to achieve common outcomes.

Yesterday, in Derry and Strabane, we received confirmation of the long-awaited city deal match funding. That funding can be a catalyst for regeneration after decades of neglect and underinvestment. While it is welcome, further work needs to be done. Derry has an unfortunate history of being ignored and discriminated against when it comes to the development of our universities. Now, we have an opportunity to put that approach behind us. I call on the Health Minister and the Minister for the Economy to sign off on the graduate entry medical school for Ulster University at Magee without further delay.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: Before I start my remarks in earnest, having reflected on the passing of our colleague John Dallat earlier, I would like to thank various Members who have shared their condolences through the course of this debate.

Every time that we have debated Budgets in this place since January, we have had to acknowledge extraordinary circumstances. Earlier this year, we were debating spending allocations that had already been committed. Then we passed the Vote on Account for spending that had already happened. Now we are debating a Budget that has already been rendered partly obsolete by COVID-19 and the subsequent response. Budgets are always works in progress. They are always statements designed to be revised and reworked as new information becomes available, but that does not mean that they should not be scrutinised in their own terms.

The Budget has things that are welcome, things that are worrying and many things that are left out. We know that the COVID-19 crisis will create not just new challenges in our public services and our economy but that it will ruthlessly expose all the existing weaknesses that we have procrastinated over since the end of the conflict here. We do not know precisely when we will be out of the crisis, but, when we are, we know, as various Members have reflected, that we will need to take a fresh look at how we organise our public services and our economy. That will require a fresh and detailed look at our fiscal position. Clear, long-term budgeting will need to be at the core of that, but, with respect, this Budget, for obvious reasons, is neither long term nor clear.

There is some avoidable confusion in the document. For example, several Departments state that they are working to deliver outcomes based on the draft Programme for Government. Presuming that this refers to the 2016 draft Programme for Government, it would be useful to know what the current status of that document is. It would appear from some departmental chapters that some Departments, including the Department for the Economy and DAERA, are working to those outcomes but that others are not.

That confusion is in part a product of the mash of packages from which funding has been derived over the past number

of years, which is in part a product of the stop-start nature of devolution here. Fresh Start, confidence and supply and New Decade, New Approach could be the names of new records from a band that had great promise 20 years ago but whose fans have long since grown tired of hyped promises that never quite deliver and public rows between members. Many of the packages were of themselves welcome and necessary, but the way in which they have been delivered add confusion to Executive budgeting, with pots of hypothecated money left here and there and others left half-filled or cynically double-counted by the Treasury, as with some of the New Decade, New Approach money that we have talked about already.

That, along with the enormous financial scandal of RHI, has frayed public confidence, but it has also led to a significant level of confusion about our budgeting processes among the public. Indeed, I estimate that there is a very high level of confusion about our budgeting processes in the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is one of the many reasons why we need to introduce much greater clarity on Budget processes than exist at present, and that includes how we are spending COVID-19 money. We have large amounts of money centrally held for fairly vaguely described items such as business support and support for vulnerable members of society, and, while I acknowledge that these are extremely important things and completely vital, we need to know where exactly that money is being spent. On the other hand, the additional COVID-19 allocations do not so far contain any funding at all for the Infrastructure Department. As others have said, it would be helpful to understand why.

An important question is: why is £2.3 million being held centrally to pay the UK Exchequer for the cost of lower long-haul air passenger duty? That was devolved to us a number of years ago, but there are currently no long-haul flights from Northern Ireland, and, for that matter, global aviation of all kinds, short and long haul, has collapsed. Why is that £2.3 million being held? There may be a good reason that I do not understand, but it would be helpful to know why. One use of that £2.3 million — it would take significantly less than that — would be my plan, which I have published and recommended to the Executive, to save and protect local media. I hope that the Minister and others can get on board with that. Indeed, the 'Newry Reporter', his local paper, is one of those that has had to furlough its operations. I hope that the Executive can get behind that, and that is one small way that we could use that money.

As I said, the crisis will reveal even more sharply the challenges that we already face but have failed to deal with. This is something that we all bear responsibility for. Our economy is among the least productive in these islands, and, when you leave aside our hallowed grammar schools, we have poor educational outcomes. Our public spending has failed to deliver on infrastructure investment, and that has made our productivity problem even worse. Where we do have skilled young people, we have a shocking inability to keep them here or to bring them back once they leave, added to which we have the looming threat of an exit from the Brexit transition period without a new trade deal and with the UK Government apparently backsliding on their commitment to implement the Ireland protocol. This Budget barely mentions Brexit, although there are some specific allocations. I hope that the Minister — I am sure that he will — agrees with my call

that the Executive as a whole should ask for an extension on behalf of Northern Ireland.

For all those reasons, we urgently need to match our Budget plans to a long-term strategy for the future of our public services and our economy. I urge the Finance Minister — I think that we may be in some agreement on this — to bring forward plans for both the fiscal council pledged in New Decade, New Approach and the fiscal commission that he has suggested. That needs to be joined up to an operation of long-term economic forecasting. We need to have a long, hard look at how we get out of the funk of simply going in supplication to an often cynical or just distracted UK Treasury. I say respectfully to some of my colleagues on the Finance Committee, including the Chair, who is no longer with us, that while the UK Exchequer might seem generous at certain moments, supplication is not a long-term acceptable fiscal strategy for Northern Ireland.

What are the other ways that we can find to invest in our public services and to make our economy here more productive? Why, for example, are we not making more use of our limited borrowing powers? The cost of borrowing is very low at the minute. This year, why are we not using the reinvestment and reform initiative to invest in the productivity and infrastructure that we so sorely lack and that we will need to recover properly from the COVID-19 crisis? What are our plans to make better use of financial transactions capital?

We are currently placed in the invidious position of having one meaningful and politically acceptable form of revenue-raising, that of rates, and specifically non-domestic rates, but we know that those rates fall hardest on the sectors of the economy that will be hit worst by COVID-19, that is to say, hospitality and retail. That cannot be right. The world around us has changed. We cannot avoid changing any longer. Let this be the last Budget based on short-term fixes and moving around pots of money. Let us all do better next time.

Mr Middleton: I join with colleagues in passing on my sympathies and condolences to the family and loved ones of Mr John Dallat MLA, and indeed to our SDLP colleagues as well. I know that this is a difficult time for everyone, but particularly for those who are bereaved, and my sympathies are with them.

We all recognise that this Budget process is like no other, given that we find ourselves in a situation with COVID-19. The challenging financial pressures that many in our communities and our businesses are facing are evident to us all. It has long been the case that the Department of Health has been the priority, and, of course, that should remain the case, but, at the same time, we know that there needs to be a greater emphasis on some of the other Departments as well.

The Budget allocations have been overshadowed by the public health crisis that we find ourselves in. The Budget document refers to the fact that the response to COVID-19 has been developed mainly outside the Budget 2020-21 process. I acknowledge that that needed to be the case, to allow for money to be issued quickly and also to allow for flexibility.

The context in which the Budget process is taking place is indeed extremely fluid, making it very difficult for Committees to scrutinise the Budget. It is next to near

impossible to do that, but, at the same time, we recognise the unique position that we are all in. There is no doubt that, whilst there are issues in the Budget, we do have to be mindful that whatever we do, the priority should be protecting lives and livelihoods during this pandemic. I welcome the additional funding allocated in response to the COVID-19 crisis to maintain our public services, support our businesses and to protect the vulnerable.

My comments today are very much focused on the elements relevant to the Department for the Economy. At the recent meeting of the Economy Committee, we heard from the Economy Minister about the actions being taken in her Department to support business. It is very much welcome that the Department for the Economy has received £370 million, so far, for its COVID-19 response, with a total requirement of £418 million. In particular, the £270 million that was allocated to the small business grants scheme has, in my opinion, been very effective and has saved a number of businesses, but we appreciate that that is short-term and that we need more support going forward to try and kick-start our economy. The £100 million allocated to the £25k grants scheme is again a good news story. There are, no doubt, people who are falling between the gaps, but I urge the Finance Minister to work with the Economy Minister to ensure that, if there are gaps and businesses are falling between the stools, we can get the support to them sooner rather than later.

At the Economy Committee, the Minister mentioned the need to look at the recovery phase. Without starting too soon, and being mindful of the ongoing concerns, we need to start looking at how we plan to get our businesses back on their feet and through this crisis, and start to rebuild our economy again. At last week's Committee briefing, officials indicated that there may well be elements of the departmental budget and that of its arms-length bodies that could be repurposed for the COVID-19 response. Again, it is making scrutiny of this very difficult. In their contribution, the officials flagged up that there are resource-related, high-priority pressures of between £180 million and £200 million. Again, most of that is related to the COVID-19 response.

With regard to capital inescapable pressures, the Department indicated a total of £70 million, which includes two significant sums for construction work and associated costs for further education and Invest NI EU funding.

As a key driver of the COVID-19 response, the Department for the Economy must have its budgetary needs prioritised. The Committee looks forward to the outcome of the June monitoring round to better assess where the Department's budget position sits. The Budget document also highlights the Department's key policy initiatives for 2020-21. Key current policy focuses include the skills strategy to support our skills system and the changing needs of individuals and the economy; the tourism strategy; the energy strategy; city deals, covering tourism, innovation, digital and skills projects; and, of course, preparing for and managing the EU exit consequences. There are a number of areas that, as a Committee, we need to focus on, but the budget needs to be there to ensure that we can deal with a lot of these issues going forward.

I want to now turn to a few of the recent announcements that have been made, particularly on the city deal. That is very welcome news. We know that, last year, the UK Government announced a funding package for the

city deal and the inclusive future fund. That is welcome news, and I very much welcome the Executive's decision to match fund that. That is progress, and it has been welcomed by all the stakeholders. I take this opportunity to thank those key stakeholders for lobbying us, as political representatives, and our Ministers for getting that over the line. That is good news, and it is a welcome way to get our economy moving again as we come out of this crisis.

The other issue that I want to turn to is the medical school. We know that that is very much part of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, and we need to see the new medical school get over the line. I am working with my colleague in the Department for the Economy, and we know that other Ministers are very much pushing to get it over the line. It needs to happen sooner rather than later. If anything, the current crisis highlights that there is a real need for the medical school so that we can train our doctors and ensure that they are working and residing in the north-west. That is something that we cannot allow to fall off the radar, and we need to ensure that that gets over the line before the end of May.

Finally, I want to put on record my appreciation for the package for the airports. We know that the airport in Londonderry is vital for our local tourism industry and our businesses. Those are all things that we need to support and to continue to support as we make our way through the current crisis. I urge the Finance Minister to prioritise, along with Health, the Department for the Economy because it is going to be one of the key Departments in ensuring that we can get through the current crisis.

Mr Boylan: I echo some of the comments about John Dallat and extend my sympathies and condolences to his family and to his colleagues here. I had the privilege of working with John on a number of Committees over the last 13 years.

I will speak as the infrastructure spokesperson for the party. The Department for Infrastructure has many responsibilities, including the maintenance of our roads, public transport, water and sewerage services, and planning. Those are important services that people use on a daily basis, and I believe that that is recognised by the Finance Minister, who held this portfolio in a previous mandate. He is well versed in the responsibilities that lie in DFI. His recognition is demonstrated by the 8.6% rise in the resource budget and an increase of £89 million in the capital allocation from the previous year's opening budget. In fact, this is by far the highest resource budget increase that the Department has received in a single year since its inception as DFI. Compared with the 2016 Budget, last year's resource allocation rose by only around 3%. In the light of that, the Finance Minister's allocation can be viewed as a welcome change from past Budgets and demonstrates that he is fully aware of pressures felt by the Department.

I also commend the Finance Minister on his recognition of the importance of transport and connectivity during the coronavirus pandemic, as he, along with Executive colleagues, has secured support for airports. Additionally, £95 million has been centrally held for transport issues.

5.00 pm

Looking ahead, the recent announcement of £700 million of funding will also help to develop key infrastructure

developments throughout the North, and that is to be welcomed. The circumstances for the Budget are not normal and the reality is that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be held in the confines of the conventional departmental budgets. We need to look at our response to the pandemic in a holistic fashion. That is why, instead of allocating funding on a departmental basis, the Executive have agreed the funding to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic on a needs basis.

We also need to look at the Budget in context in order to completely understand our situation. To do that, we have to recognise the crippling effects that 10 years of Tory austerity has had on our public services. COVID-19 has reminded people of the importance of core public services and the people who deliver them. However, the same public services have been stripped of funding for years and years under austerity. That is evident in the fact that, even with an 8.6% rise in the resource budget, it still leaves significant departmental budgetary pressures.

The reality is that the Department for Infrastructure has been dealing with constraints for years as a result of the Tories' reckless financial policies. Under normal circumstances, austerity was highly damaging to our public services. Now, however, it is that same soaking away of public expenditure that is harming the Department's ability to respond to COVID-19.

Translink, for example, is experiencing a reduction of 90% to 95% of passengers. If, as a result of austerity, it had not had to eat into its reserves over the past few years, it would likely be in a stronger position to deal with the crisis. Instead, Translink was already calling for much needed additional funding way before the virus arrived in this island. Now its situation has escalated as the entire Department is facing significant pressures as a result of the crisis and that is mostly in public transport, NI Water and DVA. The consequences of austerity's disregard for public services is demonstrated in full during the time of public emergency, and is a testament to its failure as a policy.

That is also compounded by the fact that the British Government have reneged on their commitments in New Decade, New Approach, one of which was turbocharging infrastructure. Then you also have to consider the costs of Brexit upon the North. Although it is difficult to assess the total costs, it is safe to say that the loss of access to co-financing provided through competitive programmes such as the Connecting Europe Facility will have a detrimental impact on our infrastructure.

To conclude, I commend the work of the Minister of Finance who, within the context of this heavily constrained environment, addressed those challenges. That is demonstrated in the biggest increase to the DFI's resource budget since the Department was created, with a significant jump in capital allocation and £95 million being held centrally for transport issues during COVID-19.

Sadly, there are fears among most that a new round of austerity may hit us after the crisis. However, if there are any lessons to be learnt with regard to COVID-19 and 10 years of austerity, it is that real investment in our public services is what is needed so that we can all move forward. Sin a bhfuil le rá agam.

Mr Storey: I join the Members of the House who have expressed their condolences to the Dallat family on the sad passing of a Member of the House, Mr John Dallat. I

offer my personal condolences to the family and also to his party at the loss. It is but a reminder to us all that there is but a step between us and death. We would all do well to remember the words of the saviour when he said:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

There is a rest and a peace to be found in him, even in the midst of crisis and turmoil.

I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board because my comments will be focused on the settlement for the Department of Justice and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

It is disappointing that we have come to the House four years since the last Budget was presented to us — I presented that Budget in 2016-17. The reason for that is that the party opposite, which now holds the ministry of Finance, decided for political reasons, and nothing else, to walk away. Without worrying about the medical school, the poor, the unemployed, children or education, but for purely political reasons, it ran away. Members, do not be under any illusion: if that party thought that it was politically expedient, it would do it again, because what drives that party is not care for the poor and the oppressed but its political ideology. Shame on the party opposite that it took four years for it then to come back to the House after it got more concessions from the Treasury.

I have listened to those Members talk about Tory austerity and the big, bad Tories, but look at page 6 of the Budget document. Perhaps, figures do not mean much to the Members opposite. It states that 85% of the Budget comes from the block grant. Where does that come from? Does it come from the Irish Republic? Does it come from Europe? Does it come from fiscal policies that we have here? No: it comes from the very place that the Members opposite criticise. They never miss an opportunity. They have no thankfulness or gratitude. They just say, "Give us more".

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr O'Toole: The Member seems to have an interesting conception of Northern Ireland's fiscal position. Does he recognise that people here pay taxes for public services that, by law and without any choice, have to go to the Exchequer in London, and the constitution means that the money comes back here? That is not a choice that anyone here has.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for that. I was going to commend him for the way in which he presented his comments earlier and set a balanced approach — perhaps more balanced than mine — to the Budget. He makes a valid point: yes, we do pay our taxes. Remember, however, that if we depended only on paying our taxes, there would be an almost £10 billion deficit. That deficit is made up by the Exchequer. Let us not cut off the hand that feeds us. Let us have a little bit of gratitude. I am sure that that will be lost on the Members opposite, who will find some other political imagination to have a go at the British Government.

While, on the face of it, the settlement for the Department of Justice has a 6.3 increase, which would equate to around 3%, for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in real terms, it is a standstill budget. It is a flat budget with

regard to what is provided for the Police Service. Let us remember that the Police Service is the most scrutinised, looked at, observed and changed, and there are all the other things that it has to do as well as provide for us all a peaceful and safe community.

The pressures that the Police Service is under include such issues as legacy litigation, compensation, holiday pay, injury awards, estates, body armour, human resources, and technology. The list goes on and on. There was a funding gap of £58 million. I cannot criticise the party opposite for being ungrateful and, then, not be grateful myself: the Department of Justice provided in-house an additional £23 million for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. That is welcome. However, the reality is that a challenge remains.

During the COVID-19 crisis, we have seen a particular demand, sadly, that relates to the rise in domestic abuse. Shame on those who would engage in such a vile thing in society. Last week, the House debated the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. Where will the additional resources be found to ensure that the police are adequately resourced to be able to deliver on that? Let us remember that, last week, an Audit Office report stated that, over 10 years, £200 million has been taken from the police budget. If they had delivered a reduction in headcount, that would equate to 4,000 officers.

I want to conclude with a comment on what is in this Budget. My colleague has already spoken on the need for £15 million for health provision in the maiden city of Londonderry and the medical school. In the New Decade, New Approach deal there was a commitment to increase the number of police officers to 7,500. Minister, will you tell me, and the House, where that money is and what has happened to the Barnett consequential with regard to the additional 20,000 officers that was announced by the Prime Minister? Where are we on giving the PSNI those additional officers? It cannot be that one side gets what was agreed and the other side — and the other part of the agreement — is left for six months or six years. We will not wait. If it is a deal, then we do them both together or we do not do them at all.

I will wait for an answer from the Finance Minister this afternoon.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister and his Department for all the hard work that they have done at this time. I recognise the difficulties of working from home, the pressures and the anxiety over this pandemic. Like my colleague from north Antrim, we have all seen that rise in domestic violence and the cries for help coming through our offices. We, in Lisburn, know the great work that the PSNI are doing and I want to put that on record to try to see where we, possibly, can come out of this at the other end.

I want to thank the Minister for what he has already announced with regard to COVID-19. I can see the fisheries support, the discretionary payments, the community support scheme, direct payments to families, school meals, the small business grants, business rates holidays, COVID-19 pressures and the help that is coming from that — I think that this Budget represents about 10% of that but I am not sure — and the Prison Service and the storage.

It is understandable that the measures have to be very blunt to get to as many people as possible, and it is

impossible to cover everyone right away. However, now that we are a few weeks down the line, the people who have been left behind by these measures must be considered, Minister. For example, industrial derailing, manufacturing and SMEs. I thank the Minister for making the £10,000 grants available to those with industrial premises below a net asset value (NAV) of £15,000, but we must look at those who have larger premises. There is nothing for them. I know the fear that those businesspeople have because they ring me — they ring us all — and they want to be there. The one thing that they need is certainty, but that certainty is not given to them and they are facing the cliff edge. If these businesses go down, they are not coming back, folks.

As I said earlier, my sister rang me last night. She and her husband have a pub in Belfast; it is a good bar, a good centrally located bar and they are finding it tough. They are finding it very difficult and they do not know what the future holds. These are not big, huge businesses but small family-owned SMEs that are the backbone of the Northern Ireland economy. Another example is a small business, in Lisburn, which rang me, and has outgoings of £8,500 per month with no income.

Businesses with multiple locations in England can get a grant for each of their premises. Why is there not something similar here, in Northern Ireland? This is not a criticism. I am trying my best to see the pressures that the Minister and his Department are under but it is a cry for help because I am getting that cry and feeling it, as are the rest of us. These are people who are not afraid of hard work, folks. We all know that. They go into the uncertainty and take the risks. They are the risk-takers in our community and they are the ones who are going to drive this economy, when we get out of this.

5.15 pm

Small freight companies — again, they are not owned by big companies — make their money from the goods that they bring back and forth from trips to England and continental Europe. What help is there for them?

There is no mention of help for students. I welcome the increase in the student hardship fund, but it is not enough. Students who are already in debt due to large tuition fees are struggling at the moment with no way to earn extra money because everything is closed. Some are still tied into rental agreements for properties that they are not using. How can we support them?

Hospitality is an area that I know personally. I spoke a bit about it earlier. These are small businesses that people have grown. They have put their lives into their businesses and are proud of them. At the end of the Troubles, there was a package, and prosperity came from the tourism that started to flood into Belfast and all parts of Northern Ireland. That growth was slow, but it came. When those people came, the businesses on the front line were the small hotels, the bars, the restaurants and the coffee shops. It was there that they got the best asset that we have in Northern Ireland: our people. We have an asset here that is second to none, but they need the tools. They cannot be expected to fight this battle without a little help. What we have at the moment is good — I recognise that and thank the Minister and his Department — but more is needed. The current rent, rates and licensing system makes it impossible for a business to sustain itself at these

low levels. Hospitality is an area that Northern Ireland has been able to grow in recent years. The Minister needs to consider the measures urgently, or the businesses that you see today will no longer be here and will not come back.

In my last few seconds, I want to say that my sister was born above a pub and she has reared her family there. I use that as one example. This has gone. They do not want it to go; they want to work. The main thing is that they did not ask to close; they were asked to. They had a viable business that they had worked hard for. We need to be sure that we can help them sustain this business and grow Northern Ireland. I am proud of Northern Ireland. I am proud of the people in Northern Ireland. I am proud of the support that I got through difficult times working behind a ring of steel in Belfast. We need to step up to the plate again, folks, because it is now worse than that.

Ms Bradshaw: I extend my sympathies to the Dallat family. I met him a few times, and I always found him incredibly charming and very polite and courteous.

I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party and will focus my comments on health spending. Only a few short months ago, with the re-establishment of the Executive, we were all full of hope that the Statutory Committees would refill the three-year void in accountability and transparency around all aspects of our devolved Administration, not least with regard to finance. It was deeply frustrating for me, as the Alliance Party health spokesperson, that the much-hailed health transformation agenda that was launched in October 2016 had been taken forward during that hiatus exclusively by civil servants in a manner that they neither sought nor desired and that associated decisions on priority and the allocation of previous years of confidence- and-supply funding were being taken without scrutiny by the representatives of those elected to the Assembly from across our community. I am pleased, therefore, that the Finance Department has received an assurance from the Treasury that the £10 million for mental health will be available this year. I am sure that we all feel that is important as we move through and beyond the pandemic.

This January, not only was the Health Committee to be re-established but we had the New Decade, New Approach deal to focus our energies on delivering for Northern Ireland. That deal contained many commitments and many proposals for much-needed change. Among those commitments were high priorities around dealing with waiting lists, reform of adult social care, the mental health strategy, palliative end-of-life care, three funded cycles of IVF and a new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol. Quickly, however, it became apparent that the financial requirements for their implementation would not be met to the level required, and so departmental officials have been faced with identifying and allocating funding to meet those commitments, while dealing with other inescapable pressures across our health workforce, work streams and workplaces. Then, just as ministerial and Executive direction was beginning to give clear guidance on political priorities, the threat and then the reality of COVID-19 refocused minds and activity. I credit the Health Minister for his recent announcements outside the pandemic with reference to the first 300 undergraduate nursing and midwifery places, as well as his announcement about a mental health champion. However, the wider health transformation agenda has, again, unfortunately, been

seriously disrupted and delayed, just as the need for transformation has been demonstrated so clearly.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown why systems are so important. It has, no doubt, thrown all financial planning for this year into disarray. It is worrying, therefore, that the allocation to date to the Department of Health to meet the challenges of coronavirus has been £205 million, despite its template response identifying that it would need between £508 million and £588 million of additional costs. I appreciate that that figure does not include the centrally held fund of £150 million for PPE. However, there remains a significant chasm between estimates of cost and allocation.

At this point, I want to raise the plight of charities and community and voluntary organisations, which have continued to provide health and well-being support across a range of conditions during the health crisis. Pages 67 and 68 of the Budget statement highlight that the Health Department is responding. It states that there is business

“Support for Voluntary and Community Sector and Independent Sector (including Hospices).”

During a call yesterday in which some Members were involved with Chief Officers Third Sector (CO3), it appeared that details of that support are not yet forthcoming, which leaves them in precarious financial positions, as well as undermining their future sustainability. All the planning for the delivery of front-line services of individual transformation programmes and initiatives will now need to be significantly revised during this year. However, that does not mean that they are any less urgent.

The impact of the reconfiguration of health and social care services on non-COVID-19 care and treatment is significant, as highlighted by the British Medical Association (BMA) just this week. It is clear that the response of the Department in dealing with COVID-19 was necessary to protect the public and those working in the health service. However, on the far side of the crisis, we need to give greater priority to catching up on things such as tackling our waiting lists. In the medium and short term, I am sure that Members share my concern for the many thousands of people who have had their appointments cancelled, their treatment delayed and their ability to stay on their care pathway seriously disrupted. We will never be able to calculate the true cost of the pandemic not just on those who have so tragically lost their life to the virus but on those whose operations and treatment have been indefinitely postponed and whose conditions have, undoubtedly, worsened. On the far side of the virus, the health service must be in a position not just to restore services but to make up for lost ground and address further pressures. That means not merely proceeding with the transformation process but hastening it. We have seen that changes in mode and place of working can take place quickly where there is strong focus and political backing. We must maintain that. To do that, we must embrace the need to include our front-line workers, allied health professionals, our charities and voluntary organisations and the many representative bodies in frank and realistic conversations about how best to meet the needs of our people urgently.

I am running out of time, so I will move to the end. The Health Committee will have to play a pivotal role in monitoring in-year financial accounts to ensure that

the reconfiguration process proposals are robust and transparent and that any associated costs represent value for money and will produce the desired improved health outcomes.

In closing, I place on record my appreciation for the work of those in the finance section of the Department of Health. 2019 was not an easy year, and it does not look as if this financial year will be any easier.

Mr Irwin: I begin by passing on my condolences to the Dallat family on John's passing.

These are unprecedented times for the House and, indeed, everyone in Northern Ireland. Today, we speak about finances and the 2020-21 Budget, but we must not forget the heavy impact that the coronavirus has had throughout the Province, the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, across the world. The health of our population is our major concern, and that is very much reflected in the Budget report. I put on record my gratitude to the nursing and care staff who live in the Newry and Armagh constituency for their brave and important work in our hospitals, nursing homes and care homes and to the paramedics, GP centres and all other providers of healthcare. Words do not do justice to how important their work has been throughout the crisis. I also offer my deepest sympathy, thoughts and prayers to the families who have suffered bereavement due to the coronavirus. This has been an awful time for many families who have suffered loss.

I will now focus on the issue before us. The budgetary positions are somewhat altered due to the virus pandemic and the measures that have been put in place to help mitigate the worst effects. We are all aware of that reality. As the focus of the Assembly continues to be on the response to the virus across our hospitals and testing sites and as the First Minister and deputy First Minister continue to chart a course through the pandemic, it is important that we also focus on the wheels of government and the fact that Departments must continue to operate to support not only the health and well-being of Northern Ireland but the social and economic well-being of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the significant support mechanisms that have been put in place by the Westminster Government to assist the public. I also welcome the role of the Departments of the Executive. Their support for people in Northern Ireland is vital. I am sure that most Members have been contacted by people who, for various reasons, are missing out on vital assistance. Work to make assistance available to as great a number as possible is ongoing by the Executive. That work has not been easy. I commend the Executive and the Department staff for their work under huge time pressures and under the pressure of a real and concerning virus risk to get schemes up and running and for making thousands of payments to businesses across Northern Ireland.

I move now to the allocation to DAERA. I welcome the progress in the Budget from an agri-food and environmental perspective. On the environment, we cannot fail to be struck by the reports circulating on the improvements in air quality and pollution during the lockdown. I have been amazed at the pictures of large cities without the usual haze of smog. That is a real and stark reminder of the impact of industry and modern-day living on our environment.

The Budget report mentions DAERA's role in the promotion and sustainability of our agri-food sectors and the protection and enhancement of the environment. It must be said again — I have said it before in the House — that, in their daily work, farmers make a massive contribution to sustaining our food supply network, which has been commendable during this period of great crisis and uncertainty, and to caring for the environment and maintaining thousands of acres of land across the Province. Food supply has been to the forefront in recent times, and panic buying brought pressure on our producers, processors and retailers. It has been evident that our network works well under immense pressure. Thankfully, those pressures have subsided somewhat. With our agri-food sector amounting to £5 billion in turnover, supporting over 100,000 jobs, it is an important sector to the future post Brexit and, indeed, post coronavirus.

Whilst we are looking closely at measures and methods of supporting that industry post Brexit, we have to look at ways to ensure that our farmers receive support to weather the virus storm. That has added an extra layer of complexity. I know that the Minister, my colleague Edwin Poots, is acutely aware of that and is actively and progressively doing what he can to mitigate those challenges along with his Executive colleagues.

As I have said before, farm support and direct payments totalling £278 million are very welcome and provide an important level of support and assurance that agri-food will continue to be supported as the final details of who to support are tied down. I suspect that these discussions could be delayed somewhat, given the necessity to focus on the coronavirus. However, I remain eager and ready to represent the voice of the farmer in the discussions that will come down the line on this issue.

These are unprecedented times. I support the paper before the House today and look forward to brighter days ahead when the House can return to full capacity.

Ms McLaughlin: First, I pay my respects to my colleague and very dear friend John Dallat and offer my heartfelt condolences to his wife, Anne, and his much-loved family whom he constantly talked about and also to my colleagues because it is a great loss for us in the SDLP family.

I will speak as the economy spokesperson for the SDLP. It is almost surreal to be discussing a Budget under the shadow of COVID-19. As other Members have said, it has been absolutely impossible to adequately scrutinise this Budget as we are trying to do so in an evolving health and economic crisis. At this point, I commend my colleagues here in relation to their comments about looking at our fiscal powers and looking at our borrowing, and the passionate plea by the Member for Lagan Valley for more COVID-19 support, particularly for the hospitality and tourism industry. It is really important. There is a lot of distress out there.

These are extraordinary times that require extraordinary responses, yet the challenges and priorities that we face today — health, skills, infrastructure and climate change — are essentially the same as those that we faced before this pandemic, albeit there is greater urgency. Northern Ireland's National Health Service has shown amazing capacity for resilience and its ability to reform its structure and to do it quickly during this emergency. That approach needs to be built upon, and it needs to be built in its DNA,

with urgent implementation of the reforms outlined in the Bengoa review.

Those investments have to be backed by greater investment in training a new generation of professionals. I, too, welcome the recent announcement of the expansion of the training provision of nurses, but we must make very urgent progress in approving the graduate-entry medical school in Magee. This is an absolute demand and priority for the SDLP, which is why we successfully insisted that it be included in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: No, sorry.

Our commitment to skills goes beyond that. As we emerge from the worst of the COVID-19 crisis, we will need to consistently and constantly evaluate our approach to skills. Let us be clear: we need to step up on our output of graduates with the relevant skills and of our vocational training programmes for our workforce and our future workforce across the entire age range of our existing workers and our potential workers. That means that we have to get the 14-to-19-year-old skills strategy absolutely right. I am really concerned about the situation facing our young adults and teenagers. What future are they facing? My generation has failed them with the environment and climate crisis that we are giving them as a legacy. Will we now also leave them an economy that fails them?

For all the talk of COVID-19 and of us all being in this together, it is simply not true. The risk is that it increases division: the division between those who can work at home, who have a well-paid income, and those who cannot. I am thinking of the vulnerable, insecure workers: the cleaners, delivery riders and taxi drivers. Those are the people who we have a special duty of care towards. It is those pupils who leave school without the best grades or qualifications who risk a future in the gig economy in which they will struggle to survive and to earn. Let us make sure that we do not fail them.

So far, as our party's economy spokesperson, I have spoken about health and education. Yet, I am still talking about the economy, and that is because these issues span the Departments and responsibilities of individual Ministers, and that is why I urge the Executive Ministers to work together. I know that I speak for my Minister, Nichola Mallon, when I say that our party is absolutely committed to joint working to make this a better place. I urge all Ministers to do the same.

That brings me to another urgent priority, and that is infrastructure. Probably the number-one priority for our society is to withstand the current and, perhaps future, isolation lockdown, and ensure that we have the right telecommunications, broadband and electricity infrastructure to enable us to reduce carbon emissions. The lead Department for this is Economy, and broadband is absolutely essential for getting our economy right. We need to work closely with the private sector to ensure that we get the fastest possible deployment of the fastest possible broadband. If we fail to do this, and we are already miles behind other countries, we are placing our economy at the back of the pack.

We need to respond to these extraordinary times with the flexibility to adjust our spending programmes to focus on the emerging priorities of ramping up performance in

health provision, increasing our skills output and investing in the necessary infrastructure. To do this will require the Ministers of Northern Ireland to work like never before, and they must work together. I urge them to do so.

Mr Allister: These are challenging and difficult times and so they will continue, I fear, because on the other side of COVID-19, the fiscal commitments that have been made will have to be paid for, and the economy — whatever shape it emerges in — will be indisputably weaker than when it entered the crisis. Therefore, facing into that, it is a comfort to any thinking person to know that, at our back, we have a major country, the United Kingdom, with a leading role in the world's economy and with opportunities and reserves far greater than many lesser countries. Therefore, as her Majesty's Minister of Finance here continues to spend the money sent from the Treasury, and as we look forward to playing our part, as part of that nation, in picking up this economy hereafter, we do have the comfort of knowing that far from chasing the rainbows of some fantasies — constitutional or otherwise — we are part of a solid reliable economy, and that is a good place to be during difficulties such as we are facing.

In the last Budget debate, we had a discussion about the fiscal deficit. The Minister tried to diminish the fiscal deficit, tried to talk down the amount of money that we get in the block grant, and took refuge in all sorts of inexplicable obfuscations to minimise it. I am, therefore, glad that today, in his Budget document at paragraph 2.3, there is this emphatic and unmistakable statement. This is a document in which the Minister writes the foreword, of course. It is his Budget document. It states:

"The taxes generated within Northern Ireland are considerably less than the level of funding received from HM Treasury, this shortfall is known as the fiscal deficit."

They are "considerably less". That is the reality that I and other Members were talking about in the last Budget debate and the reality that the Minister was seeking to deny. I am glad, therefore, that it is down in black and white in his document today.

Speaking of paragraph 2 of the document, I draw the House's attention to the very next subparagraph. It states:

"The most important point to note is that all DEL allocations, frequently referred to as the NI Block Grant, are made on the basis of a clear separation between Resource ... and Capital."

That is plain wrong. It is wholly misleading and factually inaccurate to say that DEL allocations are:

"frequently referred to as the ... Block Grant".

The block grant, as surely we should know, is DEL plus AME. The block grant is cash. The block grant in tables 1 and 2 etc in the annexe is the DEL and the AME. It is not a mere £12 billion or £14 billion as the DEL tables show. Indeed, go to the current Treasury publication of the United Kingdom Estimates and look at page 424 and you will see that the estimated block grant, the payment into the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund for this year, is £22.6 billion. That is what the block grant is. It is not just DEL. I must say that I am astounded that a Department would produce a document that contains such a misleading assertion: that the DEL allocations are:

“frequently referred to as the ... Block Grant”.

I say it again: that is just wrong. Why is it here? The block grant is DEL plus AME. I would like the Minister to explain why the matter is so misdescribed in paragraph 2.4. It is not just some flippant document that is dashed off for someone’s entertainment. It is the Budget document. It is supposed to be accurate and complete, so why is it misleading in paragraph 2.4.

I want to ask a few other questions that come out of the document. Paragraphs 2.36 to 2.38 refer to the confidence and supply monies, and I confess that I have almost lost track of all of it. I simply ask the Minister this: has all the confidence and supply money that was previously promised been paid or promised to be paid, or is there still a shortfall in that regard?

Paragraph 2.34 deals with New Decade, New Approach and the Budget document sets out various amounts of money. They total £523 million that seems to be coming. If I recall correctly, the Minister previously said that the figure that should have been coming from New Decade, New Approach was £740 million. Which is the up-to-date figure?

Finally, I once asked the Minister a question for written answer — AWQ 238/1722 — about what efficiencies would be required from Departments. He answered that question by saying that, when we came —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Allister

Mr Allister: — to the allocations to various Departments —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Mr Allister. I did show a bit of leeway, but we are now seven and a half minutes into your contribution.

Mr Allister: I very much apologise. I simply ask that the Minister would, at some point, give an updated answer to that question for written answer.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That was a very sincere apology [*Laughter.*]

5.45 pm

Miss Woods: I also express my condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Mr John Dallat.

As I stated last time I commented on the Budget in this Chamber, we need a comprehensive, adequate process, with real time for scrutiny. Notwithstanding the difficult circumstances that we find ourselves in, we are still in the same position that we were in February. We do not have any of the detail. The Executive talk of a new decade, and a new approach, but this is more of the same old.

As the Chair of the Justice Committee has already outlined, the Committee had a short period of time to examine the Department’s budget. I found it difficult to scrutinise the proposals, due to the absence of estimated costs, and lack of detailed information on funding for various parts of the Department and other bodies. The scale of the costs for COVID-19 had not been supplied. The funding gap for the PSNI has not been met, and there were no indicative costs for the New Decade, New Approach commitments. We do not know the extent to which slippage will shape the departmental budget, what the impact will be or what the re-prioritisation by the Minister will look like. In the case of Brexit, a forgotten

issue at this time, we are told that a separate exercise is to be carried out by the Department of Finance to address funding gaps, but that just shows an overarching wait-and-see approach.

This is not how Budgets should be planned, how public money should be spent and it is not a good example of governance. Greater transparency is needed in order for us to see what avenues Departments are going down, to ensure that this is effective, and also for us to scrutinise what is going on. I look forward to additional time in Committee to scrutinise this process.

I will not repeat all the issues that I raised before in this Chamber, many of which should be addressed by this Budget but are not addressed sufficiently, including local council funding, the hospitality industry, housing, adequate resources to tackle climate breakdown and our ecological crisis and the need for the independent environmental protection agency that this House committed to. I agree with the comments of Mr Frew made earlier. This Budget will be subject to change, but I argue that it must change.

I ask a very simple question: are we prepared for what is coming? Is this Budget sufficient? Will this shape the aftermath of COVID? We know about the businesses and people who are falling through the cracks, and that we are staring into the face of another economic recession. It is estimated that the Northern Ireland economy alone will contract between 6.7% and 10%, so how are we going to tackle that? It is certainly not through the matching City Deal money, which is not new and is already committed to by Westminster, with a focus solely on gross value added (GVA). GVA means nothing when there is no food on the table, or when living in fuel poverty in a freezing house.

The pandemic and lockdown have laid bare the precariousness of many people’s livelihoods, the plight of the self-employed, those on inadequate contracts, the pay and conditions of our essential workers, who are, basically, those who we need the most. Inequalities are more apparent than ever. Landlords are given mortgage holidays, while those who rent struggle to pay their bills. Those from lower income backgrounds are disproportionately suffering because of health inequalities. Children, who, because their families cannot afford the additional equipment, are disproportionately affected by the closure of schools which can have lasting effects on their learning and future prospects. Today, it was announced that over 2 million children are experiencing food poverty in the UK since lockdown began. COVID is certainly not the great leveller, as it has been described.

The last opportunity when there was growing momentum for change was after the financial crash of 2008 but, instead of tackling inequality and bailing out our people, those in power decided to bail out the banks, and deepen disadvantage through crippling cuts to public services in the age of austerity.

We cannot return to the old way of doing things. In the context of a global health emergency, some Governments around the world have bailed out workers. Some are introducing a minimum vital income. The pandemic, its effects and the response are consistently referred to in warlike terms. We know that the need to reduce poverty and boost the economy after World War II led to the foundation of the modern welfare state.

So far, we missed a glaring opportunity to introduce a universal basic income (UBI) that would go some way to redress the many inequalities and pave the way for a just recovery from the global health emergency. Whilst I welcome the political parties joining our call for a UBI, there has been no action.

There should be no return to business as usual. The new normal must incorporate some of the things that we all witness around us now, things that, just a few months ago, seemed almost impossible to achieve. The state must be able to meet those challenges.

Why has it taken a pandemic to result in positive environmental indicators? That we now have better air quality should not be seen as some silver lining to the crisis; it should be something that we, as citizens, demand moving forward into recovery and beyond. Instead of returning to the roads and resuming the daily commute, sitting in private cars on our own and complaining about the lack of parking spaces, we should be thinking about more flexible working patterns and conditions, and serious investment in the provision of public transport and active travel.

How do we measure success? Is it through economic growth, or should we have other priorities in health outcomes, education, justice and the environment? Why is there always money for war but never enough for health and education? We need to look at other criteria for measuring the success of our communities and societies so that they are met with nurturing and resourcing in the interests of the public good. Not narrow macro-economic objectives but community and social objectives. GDP obsession and perpetual capitalist growth to some unknown destination is no longer the dish of the day, and at the heart of this is the need for a true, green and just recovery as the basis for our future development model.

Now is the time to develop a new sustainable economy as part of a fair and just recovery so that new jobs are created in an ethical and environmentally friendly way. That can be achieved through a just transition and a green new deal, which all of the Executive parties supported in previous mandates and manifestos but, unsurprisingly, is not here today.

A green recovery presents us with a short- and long-term vision of sustainable jobs for life, with simultaneous improvement socially, environmentally and economically. It is not about getting back to business as usual to a world where many struggle to get by. A green recovery will address the fundamental problems that this pandemic has brought to the surface for us, including the valuation of the workforce and what is valued as being “key” or, in crude Brexit terms, “skilled”.

As a colleague of mine has been arguing, it is not the currency speculators who are important for the functioning of our society when it is stripped back to the essentials: it is the nurses, the carers, the posties, the bus drivers, the refuse collectors, the prison officers, the police, the funeral directors, the shelf-stackers, those who keep the lights on and the water running, the teachers, those who work in our refuges and our homeless shelters and those who work in community and voluntary agencies. The list goes on.

Missing from this Budget are the very options that we need to have in order to answer the fundamental question that I raised about what kind of world we want to get back to. What this Budget does, yet again, is put the sign up on

our door saying, “Normal business as usual”. That cannot and will not be the case. We need to build back better and reimagine a society that works for everyone.

Mr Carroll: I put on record my condolences and sympathies to Mr Dallat’s family and party colleagues.

There is no escaping that we are in the throes of a global health pandemic and are veering into a deep recession as we consider the Budget. The period ahead may be filled with massive uncertainty, but one truth rings clear as a bell: we cannot return to the normality that gave rise to this crisis. No return to normal.

That sentiment has been felt and expressed around the globe and, unsurprisingly, has been felt most strongly by those at the bottom of society who feel the outworkings of this pandemic most sharply. No return to our nurses standing in the freezing cold for months for the pay that they deserve and no more systematic under-funding of our health service until it is perpetually at the brink and under-prepared for whatever crisis is around the corner. No more food production based on bottom prices and agri-food competition, which pumps our food full of antibiotics and gives rise to new and resistant viruses and destroys the environment to the tune of millions of tonnes of carbon. Summed up, it is a fundamental break with an economic system that gives primacy above all else to the market and breeds through competition. The very duo that sees nations around the world struggle for basic orders of PPE, including the Finance Minister apparently.

This emergency shows that we need emergency action that goes beyond treating the current pandemic. This Budget, I am afraid, does nothing of the sort, nor does it try to. There is no ambition for a different kind of economic agenda and, in my role as one of the very few opposition MLAs, I will do my best to scrutinise it today, although I share others’ sentiments that it has been hard to scrutinise over the past few days. It is bizarre in the extreme to hear Committee Chair after Committee Chair raising concerns, many of which I concur with, when many of them will vote for this Budget Bill regardless.

Look at health. The big parties in the Executive have spent years implementing Tory cuts to our NHS. That had a very real impact during the crisis, with too few ventilators and ICU beds, too little PPE and a lack of capacity to properly test. We have been forced to play catch-up while the virus has spread. One might hope that there was a lesson here, but looking through the fine detail of the Budget projections it is clear that nothing has been learned.

Much is made of a 6% bump for the health budget, which certainly would be promising if it were not for inflation and the fact that we are all living longer and adding to the cost of running the health service. That means that it is not really a 6% increase at all. It is not a significant increase in real terms. If anything, it is a repeat of similar baseline austerity Budgets with “savings” at their heart. Indeed, as I pointed out in the Health Committee, these projections are predicated on at least a £50 million cut to health trusts across the region — £50 million stripped away from our health service during a global pandemic — but that figure was not the headline, unlike the supposed 6% bump. While communities are out clapping for the NHS every Thursday, some elected reps are suggesting £50 million cuts to the health service. It would be unbelievable if it were not so true to form.

Sticking with Health, this Budget guarantees a continuation of the logic of the Bengoa report, which is predicated on efficiencies and savings, rather than the massive investment needed in our health service. Clearly, the strong warnings from unions and health workers about such an agenda have fallen on deaf ears. I do not look forward to future sittings of this Assembly when we look back at the ruinous impact of such a strategy, but I fear that that will indeed come to pass.

Where is the commitment to double the funding to mental health — a basic demand that mental health workers say will make a massive difference. The increase in depression and anxiety that isolation has brought should have given us the impetus to act on this issue. Once again, mental health has been relegated.

I now move on to the other crisis that faces us, climate change. It is often said by environmental activists that this Assembly is addicted to roads. Look at the Department for Infrastructure figures; this Budget will not prove them wrong. There is £75 million for the new A5, but where is the budget for rectifying the additional air pollution that that will cause — air pollution that kills one in 24 people in Belfast alone. Nor is there reference to rectifying the air pollution likely to come from the York Street interchange. Nor, and this is stark, is there a massive increase in investment in Translink, which, just months ago, warned that our public transport system will collapse without additional funding. Where is that funding? A break with individual cars will not come without a proper alternative, but this Budget does not provide one.

Instead of sustainable funding for Translink, we have seen suggestions from the Finance Minister for further austerity in the request that Translink staff should be furloughed to deal with this crisis. This suggestion of further austerity will only make the situation worse. The Committee Chair raised concerns about Translink's future.

I move on to the Department for Agriculture. There is no attempt to intervene to create a food production sector that shirks competition in favour of health and sustainability for those of us who eat the food and those who produce it. This will be vital in the challenges around the global climate crisis.

We see a reflection of previous austerity Budgets in the section on the Department of Finance, where it talks about:

“Improving effectiveness across the public sector by transforming the way the [Civil Service] works”.

We all know what that is code for. It is the same tale that was spun to us when the voluntary exit scheme saw 20,000 secure, unionised jobs offered up on the chopping block. The result today is that most of those workers have been replaced by agency staff on precarious contracts, unable to join a union; encroaching privatisation; and a massive bill from recruitment agencies.

What was done to the Civil Service in the name of effectiveness under the previous Executive was a neo-liberal's dream and a worker's nightmare. Again, either lessons have not been learned or the new Executive are as neo-liberal as the previous one.

Two measures relating to COVID-19 are mentioned in the Budget. For me, the standout figure was £99 million for

businesses. Undoubtedly small businesses need support during this crisis, but just as necessary is a large injection of financial aid for individuals thrust into poverty and unemployment. The economist Michael Roberts has noted this trend right across Europe: state aid for businesses at around four times that for ordinary people. Though it is notable that, compared with other Governments, we have given out much less.

On the question of rates, for example, I do not oppose freezing the domestic rate and reducing the regional rate to help struggling small businesses, but in my view, the Executive must go much further, and workers and families should also see their rate payments cut.

There is a question around the priorities —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Carroll, we are beyond seven minutes. Thank you.

Mr Carroll: I will continue to scrutinise this Budget. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Dead on. We will read it on the website.

Mr McNulty: I begin by sharing with other Members of the Assembly in passing on my sincere condolences to the family of my esteemed colleague John Dallat.

To me, John epitomised the size of the fight in the man as opposed to the size of the man in the fight. He was a warrior for peace, justice and social democracy, and he will be greatly missed.

6.00 pm

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. We are in uncertain times, and, as many fellow Members have said, this is no ordinary Budget. The Minister has also indicated that it will need to be reviewed in a few weeks' time, which makes today's debate important and yet, at the same time, almost futile. Our public finances have never faced so much pressure and demands, and, given that reality, there is also much uncertainty and a lack of the normal scrutiny process. I want to make my contribution as a member of the Education Committee and then as a constituency MLA.

We heard today from the Finance Minister about the real-term increase in the Budget; however, our Committee has heard from the Minister of Education and his permanent secretary about the real pressures faced by the Department for Education, including £165 million in revenue spend and an additional pressure of £200 million going forward. The Budget still does not address areas such as the unacceptable backlog in the school maintenance programme, which is estimated to be in the region of £400 million. Our children are often taught in substandard accommodation, and school leaders are crying out for capital investment and maintenance. Any initiatives cannot and should not be derailed and nor should the ongoing work to reform and reboot special education needs provision and mental health support in schools.

The Budget does not take into account the new normality that our schools will face when children return to their classrooms. It does not meet the need for support to adapt classrooms physically or for the resources that are needed for what may come down the line. The Committee Chair referred to the commitments made in the New Decade,

New Approach agreement: again, the Budget makes no provision for them. It is important that we are honest with the public in the time ahead about the commitments that have been made and about what will be honoured.

I will now speak as a constituency MLA. There is lots of talk about doing things differently post pandemic, but that needs to be demonstrated in the Budget and at any review stage. I fear that we will soon transition from doing things differently back to plugging the funding gap. I fear that we will just be doing less rather than more, but we need to be ambitious for our economy and our society. An opportunity has presented itself to reboot our economy in a different way. The key to our economic recovery will be sustained capital investment and an infrastructure programme across all Departments. That will be key to getting our construction industry back to work, and it will have far-reaching impacts on all associated services and sectors from the suppliers to the corner shop.

As part of that infrastructure programme, we need to see commitments to projects such as the hourly Belfast to Dublin Enterprise high-speed rail link being delivered. We need to see investment in greenways and public transport and the delivery of broadband into every community if we are to really adapt to new ways of living and working. We need to invest in and deliver more social housing and open spaces and public parks. It is time to see the delivery of the Albert Basin park in Newry. We need the Executive to step in and step up to support councils and public bodies that have seen their income decimated in the same way as we have seen Governments step up to support some other businesses.

There is much more to do to support those who have fallen through the cracks from substitute teachers, cross-border workers and student renters to self-employed people who need financial support and not just tea and sympathy. That support needs to be timely. Too many of the pledges that we hear take far too long to implement. It is also important that we protect people from the harshest elements of welfare reform, challenges that were being faced long before COVID-19, such as the bedroom tax, although we still contend that the best way to have done that would have been to vote against it in the first place. I welcome the extension of the mitigations, but there are no mitigations to protect families from the ultra-draconian two-child rule, as it was only dreamed up by the Tories after the last Executive handed power back to Westminster. Can the Minister say whether money will be there to support the families affected?

Minister, I could go on and on, but I will not. I urge you to think of those who have contacted every one of our constituency offices in the last few weeks, whilst we have been working in different working arrangements. Our workload, as, I am sure, you will all agree, has increased threefold. People are seeking help. They are fearful about what lies ahead for them. They want the Executive and Assembly to listen and to act.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will remember that the Minister was allocated an hour. He used two minutes in opening the debate. I once read that Gladstone delivered a Budget that took seven and a half hours. The Minister has certainly smashed that record. He has 58 minutes of his hour left.

Mr Murphy: You will be pleased to know that I do not intend to take my 58 minutes, although I would kind of get a sense of revenge for sitting through four hours of the rest of you [*Laughter.*] I thank Members and the Committee Chairs for their participation in the debate. I thank Members who were supportive of the Budget proposals for their input, and I listened with interest to Members who spoke against the Budget, although, as is always the case, I heard demands for a litany of more expenditure and no propositions for where, in a finite Budget, we would cut, if we want to spend more in other areas. It is often the case that we get a list of things that we should spend money on but no suggestions of where we should take that money from. Nonetheless, Members are free to make their points and to write their statements accordingly.

I intend to use the remaining time to respond to a lot of the issues raised. I will try to be as constructive as possible. I thank the Chair of the Committee for Finance for its work on the Budget. He raised an issue about the further Vote on Account that we will need in the coming weeks. Obviously, there was recognition from, I think, nearly all the Members who spoke that we are in unique circumstances. We were in unique circumstances when we came back in January, and that has greatly multiplied over the last number of weeks. Of course, that has put a stress on some Departments that have had to spend much more than they anticipated, while other Departments spend much less, and that will make for a challenging June monitoring round. I assure you that the second Vote on Account is not based on this 2020-21 Budget; it will be based on a high percentage of the 2019-2020 expenditure. It is a technical approach to make sure that Departments have the authority to spend in order to continue to operate through the period when this Bill may not have completed its legislative passage. It is necessary because the time simply does not permit the production of a detailed Main Estimates document, and, given the fast-evolving COVID-19 situation and the spend associated with it, the Budget may be out of date by the time the Bill is passed. Of course, we will engage with the Committee on that, and I will bring the Main Estimates along with a further Budget Bill to the Assembly in the autumn, by which time, we hope, the financial position will have stabilised somewhat. Certainly, we need to ensure that the Departments can continue to spend money.

The Chair of the Communities Committee raised the issue of additional funding for councils. I am aware that the Communities Minister is working with the councils to finalise pressures, and I expect to see a paper on that. You need to bear it in mind that the £50 million Barnett consequential that came from England applies to a different set of functions related to councils from those here. Councils in England have functions in relation to social services and education, all of which we have had to spend money on here from our own budgets. Of course, there will be a loss of revenue to the councils, and we recognise that and want to ensure that we support them however we can. There will also be an opportunity for councils to save, as I said in the rates debate. Again, as with us, there are quite a lot of issues that the councils had budgeted for in anticipation of a certain outcome this year that they will now not be able to spend money on, and we look to the councils to look to themselves, in the first instance, to see what savings can be found from that.

The Chair also raised the issue of capital funding for the Department for Communities and the flexibility and certainty around all of that. Of course, I have asked Departments to look most acutely at capital spend projections, because we have already lost, effectively, the first quarter of this year. We may lose a significant proportion of the second quarter of this year, and we may not get the flexibility that people might anticipate at the end of the financial year from Treasury. We hope that we will, but there are no guarantees in relation to that. So, particularly in relation to capital budgets, we have asked Departments to look early at what, they think, they can spend and what they may not be able to spend and to work with us on that. I have to say that it is a mixed bag in terms of Departments' response to that. I noted the impassioned opinion of the Chair of the Justice Committee, who made the point well from the Committee's perspective that they will look to Departments to play their part in ensuring that we do not end up, in the early part of next year — the end of our financial year — surrendering significant portions of money back to Treasury that people had held on to in anticipation of spend that we were not able to spend.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Obviously, he has had some conversation with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, but can he confirm to the House that, while many Members come to the House and talk aspirationally about what we should do and so on, he has the power to write to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and to set out in detail that issue around flexibility? If ever there was an opportunity for us to make the argument in these circumstances and justify the flexibility, now is it. Will he commit to ensuring that that is done, if he has not already done so?

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that I have a weekly conversation with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and, of course, we write to him as well. I have recently written to him on another issue that I will raise shortly in relation to supply teachers. Yes, we have raised that, and, yes, we got assurances. The Member will know that, at the very tail end of the last financial year, the Treasury made an adjustment that forced us into a readjustment of our capital budget, which, thankfully, we were able to carry over to this year. We have argued that, rather than give us Barnett consequentials that are, perhaps, above what they may be able to deliver, we get the baseline of that so that we do not end up having to readjust later in the year. We have also argued for flexibility, but this is a very uncertain picture. While I welcome the interventions that there have been from Treasury in relation to employee retention and support for the self-employed, nonetheless there is no doubt that Treasury will look to recoup as much money as it can as the year goes on. We are asking and pressing the case, and the meetings that I do with him are often joined by the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, who have similar issues to raise with him. It is not just a demand from here but from other devolved areas. We will continue to press that case, because it will be key in the time ahead. However, Departments need to help us out in the here and now by making sure that we do not end up in a situation at the end of the year where we have a significant portion of money that we are trying to reallocate.

In relation to the sub teachers, that is another issue. People will understand this — certainly the Member who last spoke, as well as other Members who have been here a longer time. When a range of bids come in from

Departments and the Executive have a limited amount of funding, we agree how that funding will be allocated, but we also agree the funding that is not allocated. The bid in relation to supply teachers was not supported, because we had a limited amount and priorities went to other areas. That means that the Executive also agreed not to put money into that at this time. Since then, I have had several discussions with the Education Minister, because I do recognise the issue of supply teachers. A number of Members have raised the issue of supply teachers and sub teachers, and we put the case very firmly to Treasury that, while, in England, Scotland and Wales, supply teachers normally come from an agency and that agency could have them furloughed, here they come in a random fashion off a list. They are essentially very much self-employed and do not have that overarching organisation that can bid for furlough on their behalf. We have pressed that case and continue to press that case. Both the Education Minister and I have written to the Treasury, and I raised it over the course of two meetings, including last Thursday, with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. We are waiting for a response to that. We have not forgotten the issue; we will continue to press for that and try to get some support.

The Chair of the Education Committee, Chris Lyttle, raised the issue of capital funding for shared and integrated education from the Fresh Start funding, and £68 million has been provided for shared and integrated education in 2020-21. We are in discussion again with the Treasury in relation to the profile of money for future years.

6.15 pm

The Chair of the Infrastructure Committee raised several issues, particularly about Translink. Other Members also mentioned Translink. Matthew O'Toole asked where the COVID-19 funding is that the Department of Infrastructure said that it has not received. Andrew Muir raised that issue as well. Some £1.2 billion of COVID-19-related funding has come across from Treasury. We have already allocated or identified for allocation over £900 million of that. The lion's share — in and around half a billion pounds — went on business support measures and has already been spent. A significant proportion went to the Department of Health; to the Department for Communities to protect vulnerable people; and to the Department of Education to finance some of the interventions that we have made there.

We have set aside £95 million for transportation issues. To say that the Department for Infrastructure has not got any of that is not strictly accurate, because it has already allocated money to support the airports and ferries to ensure that they continue to operate. We are awaiting a proposition on freight, on which the Department is working with the Department for Transport. We have also indicated that there will be funds for Translink within the £95 million. Therefore, although it may be strictly accurate to say that, as things stand, the Department for Infrastructure has not got the funding for Translink, we have set aside money for it, and that is clearly understood by the Department.

Furloughing Translink workers is a matter for the Infrastructure Minister. We did what we were asked to do, which was to ask Treasury what the situation is with furloughing public-sector workers. We were given the criteria by which some public-sector workers, including some council staff, might be furloughed. The decision on whether then to apply for the furlough payment for workers

is a matter for the Minister or council involved. We were asked to provide the information, and that we did. The decision is then left up to the individual Minister.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Sure.

Mr Catney: You said it is for an individual Minister to decide whether to furlough workers. Would it not be for the Executive as a whole to decide?

Mr Murphy: No, I do not necessarily think that it would, no more than if an individual council had to check with other councils if it were wanting to furlough, say, workers on its leisure side who cannot be redeployed elsewhere. That is one area in which councils have certainly lost income as a consequence of COVID-19. One of the key factors is that you have to have lost income. That means that the furlough scheme would apply to Translink where it would not necessarily apply to public-sector workers across the board. If any Department has lost income, it is a matter for it to consider whether it wishes to make a case to Treasury to furlough the workers concerned. If it decides not to, it needs to manage its budgets accordingly.

Paul Givan spoke about what is required of Departments. He was referring specifically to the Department of Justice, but the points that he made can apply equally to all Departments. I say to all Committee Chairs and Committee members here that it is incumbent on each of them to scrutinise. Each Minister comes to the Assembly to be scrutinised, and rightly so, and each of the Committees has a very important role to play in that scrutiny, which I absolutely welcome. However, none of us has faced such a situation before, in which certain Departments have had to spend a significant amount of money but in which planned spend in other areas will not happen. We therefore need to make sure that we have the ability to respond. In emerging from this crisis, we need to try to assist supporting the economy, the vulnerable in society, the health service and all the other areas that Members have raised. We have to ensure that money is properly allocated throughout the rest of the year so that we do not end up in a situation in which we have Departments sitting on money and there is some sort of scramble beyond January to try to spend it. The Committees as well as the Departments have work to do in that regard.

The Chair of the Health Committee, Colm Gildernew, raised issues about the New Decade, New Approach priorities. He is correct: the British Government have not provided sufficient funding to meet what was committed to in New Decade, New Approach. The Executive have allocated £81 million to the Department of Health for transformation and £5 million for safe staffing. Those commitments were included in New Decade, New Approach, but, in the light of the impact of COVID-19, Departments had to reallocate some of their transformation allocation to meet other priorities. The Executive will need to look though that and agree to it.

A number of Members, including Daniel McCrossan and Karen Mullan, mentioned special educational needs. In this Budget, I am very pleased that we have been able to provide an additional £42 million, which is ring-fenced, for that important issue. We do not claim that it addresses all the pressures, but it will certainly go some way to addressing existing pressures to meet the needs of children and young people with special educational needs.

It is a very important step towards addressing those known pressures.

Paul Frew raised issues in relation to ongoing rate relief. He remarked that rates are a fairly small part of our resource. However, £1.3 billion in the last financial year is, by anybody's reckoning, a fairly substantial amount. He also argued for a more strategic approach to this Budget. Of course, that is what we want to do. We recognised when setting out this Budget, before we knew the depth of the situation that we would be in, that this was an unusual and time-limited approach. The clear objective is to get to a multi-annual Budget approach. I hope for, and I will certainly prepare and plan for, a much more strategic approach over a number of years. That will allow us to get much more certainty going forward. I think that everyone recognises that we are in far from ideal times for Budget preparation. I can confirm that the significant increase in the Executive Office budget that he asked about relates to the historical institutional abuse redress allocation.

A number of Members asked about how we pay our way out of this and about trying to secure as much resource as we possibly can. They raised the issue of borrowing. The Executive can access up to £200 million of borrowing, which can be used only under the reinvestment and reform initiative for capital expenditure. Without Treasury agreement, it cannot be used for resource costs such as grants to business or to help with running costs. In addition, it should be remembered that borrowing comes at a cost. In 2020-21, our significant existing borrowing of £2.5 billion will cost £169 million in repayments. Borrowing is always seen as a quick fix to meet the cost of what we might want to spend to secure our emergence from the situation that we are in, but people have to remember that we already have significant borrowing. There are restrictions on how that money can be used, and the cost of repaying it is significant. Bear in mind that some people argue that capital spend is a way to kick-start economic recovery. Significant capital spend that should have been happening in the first quarter of this year will not happen. Departments have to look at the money that they have themselves to try to assist with the priorities of the Executive.

Matthew O'Toole asked about air passenger duty. Previously, the Executive made a commitment to eliminate it. A £2.3 million Budget allocation reflected the block grant reduction agreed to devolve the power to set the level of APD from 2012. The cost relates to the duty payable on devolving the power to set the rate, not the duty that would be payable on current flights.

The former Finance Minister, who produced the last Budget here, gave us a very stern lecture on the missing years. May I remind him that we would have had a Budget in 2018-19 and 2019-2020 had his party not walked away from a deal that we had reached with it? His party's leadership was quite prepared to accept that deal, but party members scuppered it.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Let me just finish the point. The Member might allocate four years of missing Budgets to us. I assure him that at least two or three of those years were the responsibility of his party.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. We might as well get a bit of a discussion going because we will not be

going too far this evening. Although, right enough, I have a board of governors' meeting at 7.00 pm.

It does not serve the Minister well to try to shift the blame. The reality for him and his party is that they decided to pull the institutions down. The late Martin McGuinness decided, collectively — maybe not, but, whoever it was, it was decided to pull the institutions down. Will the Minister at least accept that, in doing so, Martin McGuinness created further problems for children with special educational needs, further crises in the health service and further challenges for the unemployed? As a result, the Minister cannot try to do a Pontius Pilate in the House tonight. He cannot wash his hands and say that it was somebody else. I have the letter with me. It was the late Martin McGuinness and his party that decided to do the job, so do not try to blame the DUP.

Mr Murphy: In his remarks, the Member heaped shame across the Chamber on the party opposite and did exactly what he is now accusing me of doing. He ignored the build-up to the inevitable collapse in the Executive and the role of his own party. Senior party members on his own side have acknowledged that there are lessons to be learnt, and I think that we all will learn lessons in relation to all of that. Let us not try to rewrite history in relation to what caused the issues and how long ago they could have been fixed. As I said, we could have had an Executive and a Budget for 2018-19 and 2019-2020 delivered in this House had things turned out differently.

Mr Storey made several points about financial support for the PSNI. Indeed, Mr O'Toole corrected him, pointing out that we actually pay taxes across to the Treasury. That makes up a substantial proportion of the block grant that returns. Very recently, in the past number of weeks, I allocated £4 million for additional support for the PSNI, and I am sure that he would acknowledge that. Of course, yes, there was a proposition to increase the number of PSNI officers as part of the agreement to reform the Executive, and I have had some discussions with the Justice Minister. The Member will know from his presence on the Policing Board that you cannot simply go out tomorrow and recruit 700 police officers. That commitment still stands, and I am sure that he will equally reaffirm his commitment to things like the Irish language Act to make sure that the agreement that we reached is honoured in all its forms.

Mr Storey: Here again we are seeing played out in this House a classic example of, "If we do not get what we are looking for, you will not get". However, the problem is that it is not in the Budget. That is the problem. It is on a piece of paper that says, "We will increase the numbers of police to 7,500". There is no financial commitment, yet we have a financial commitment in this document of £15 million to a medical centre in Londonderry that the business case today does not stack up for. We are then told by Members from the SDLP and Sinn Féin that we have to make sure that everything has to be done properly and that we have to have scrutiny. We are told that we cannot have anything done that is improper. If you do not have a business case that stacks up, why have you allocated £15 million to something that is not financially viable?

Mr Murphy: If he had listened to me, he would know that I said that I had a discussion with the Justice Minister as part of the Budget allocation. The Member will know that no bid came forward from Justice for that additional recruitment; the Department needs time to work that up

and work out how that recruitment will be shaped up and how it would begin. As I said, you cannot simply recruit 700 police officers overnight. I have said that there clearly is a commitment to meeting that recruitment target, but he will know that that will require Justice to come forward with propositions and a supporting bid.

The Executive announced an additional £55 million yesterday or the day before — yes, it was yesterday; we are all losing track of days — for the inclusive future fund. That was fully supported by the Executive, and, of course, only a proportion of that is for the graduate-entry medical school. There are other much-needed projects for Derry and for the north-west generally, and that is a commitment in principle to spend that. Those projects will have to be assessed, they will have to stack up and they will have to pass the necessary scrutiny and tests that any public expenditure would meet. That is clearly going to be the approach there. Nonetheless, I think that it was a very important signal to the north-west to ensure that the Executive were making that commitment. Again, we had agreed to that in the 'NDNA' document.

Pat Catney raised issues, and I get those exactly. I understand his passion for supporting small businesses. The responsibility for the £25,000 grant lies with the Department for the Economy, and an additional £40 million has been set aside to address what it calls a business hardship fund, which is intended to target those who have fallen through the gaps of existing small business grant schemes. A paper was brought forward recently on that, and that is going through the processes of Executive approval. Of course, as I said in the rates debate, we have a clear understanding of the challenges facing the hospitality, tourism and leisure industries.

In relation to the rates relief package, we offered that to all businesses, including small industrial businesses which got access to the £10K grants scheme; that was not in the initial package. We included all businesses here in that rates relief scheme, which was not the case in the English scheme. We have a specific focus on those that we know will continue to struggle, even if restrictions are lifted and businesses can start again. Clearly, some businesses will not be able to start in the way that they had operated just a short number of weeks ago, so we will look to provide all the support that we possibly can.

Some other questions were raised. It is interesting that Mr Allister waxed lyrical. Interestingly, my party leader was criticised for making a constitutional point in relation to COVID and we have a whole range of constitutional points raised from across the Floor in relation to the British Government and the funding that we have received and which I have said that I very much welcomed. He asked about the confidence and supply funding. I have secured that for 2020-21, and I expect the remainder to be provided in future years. He will know, because I told the House before, that the previous Secretary of State informed us that the confidence and supply money was gone — it was over and there was nothing more to be had so I was pleased that we did manage to secure this year's, and I intend to continue the battle to secure money in future years. Not that it was something negotiated by my party or the Executive, but it was a commitment from the Conservative party to here for a number of years and we want to see that commitment honoured.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving way. When Mr Allister talked about the block grant, he insisted that annually managed expenditure (AME) was in the block grant funding. I just want to draw to the Minister's attention a Treasury document — or a Her Majesty's Treasury document, as I am sure Mr Allister would prefer. It is from my former employer and it is very clear. The document is called 'Block Grant Transparency'. It was published in December 2018 and it makes clear that departmental expenditure limits is the block grant, and that AME is outside the block grant. I just wanted to draw that to the attention of the House and also to Mr Allister.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for anticipating my next point. *[Laughter.]* I was going to quote from a similar Treasury document, and that is the 'Statement of Funding Policy':

"Funding from the UK government to the devolved administrations falls into two broad categories: block grant (or DEL) funding and funding in relation to Annually Managed Expenditure (AME).

This chapter covers the element of block grant funding that relates to UK Government departmental spending within Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL)."

I hope that that clears the matter up for him. That is a statement of funding policy that has come from the British Government. Of course, he takes me to task over the description of the fiscal deficit. A £3 billion fiscal deficit is not an insignificant figure. If someone is sitting on universal credit it is a very significant figure and I have always acknowledged that, but what I have said is that the figures that have been bandied about, of a £10, £11 or £12 billion deficit being met by the British Government have been inaccurate. The figures that I provided during the last debate were figures that were worked out by the Department of Finance and not by me on my own, you will be pleased to know.

A number of people made points in relation to multi-annual Budgets and their ability to give us more certainty, which I have addressed. Others recognised that we are in far from satisfactory circumstances at the moment. Nonetheless, I have to say that, even though it is not satisfactory, I believe that Executive Ministers, supported by the Assembly, have risen to the challenge, have responded as best as they possibly can. They have managed to get a very significant amount of money out on the ground to support not only our Health Service in fighting this pandemic, but also to support our economy and other vulnerable people in society, through very quick interventions that, in normal circumstances, would probably take six months of planning, road testing and consultation. Schemes have been turned round in a number of days or maybe weeks and have gone out. I recognise that we are in far from ideal times in terms of scrutiny, but we also have a duty to respond as quickly as we can to the public health challenge, one of the most serious issues that I think any of us have ever faced in our lifetime.

Several Members mentioned the New Decade, New Approach deal. Despite those who have wallowed in the comfort of the support that the British Government has given us — and I welcome that support — they have certainly not got given us the commitments that they made

under New Decade, New Approach. I intend to continue to pursue that with Treasury at every opportunity, because that was a commitment that they made to all parties. Just as our political commitments to various sections of that agreement and deal are, quite rightly, held to, so too must the Government's.

It is the responsibility of the Finance Minister to bring Budget proposals before the House, and it is a responsibility that I take seriously, particularly now, when our citizens are facing such uncertainty about the future. The Executive's main focus at this time has to be on getting funding to where it needs to be to address the COVID-19 issues. In a world where a future economic, social and health landscape is uncertain, it is imperative that we provide a platform that is needed for public services to respond to changing demands. The Budget seeks to support key services now and is a platform for future responsive planning. On that note, I commend the Budget to the Assembly for its approval.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that, because this is a Budget motion, it requires cross-community support. I again remind Members present that, if possible, it would be preferable to avoid a Division of the House.

Question put.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Do Members wish to divide the House?

Question put a second time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The House will divide.

Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies.

It is important that, during any Division, social distancing in the Chamber continues to be observed. In order to facilitate that, I ask Members to do the following: any Members in the Chamber who are not due to vote in person should consider leaving the Chamber until the Division has concluded. Those Members who wish to vote in the Lobbies on the opposite side of the Chamber to which they are sitting should leave the Chamber via the nearest door and enter the relevant Lobby via the Rotunda. Those remaining Members who are sitting closest to the Lobby doors should enter the Lobbies first, and any Member who has voted may then wish to leave the Chamber until the Division has concluded.

I remind Members of the need to be patient at all times, to follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks and to respect the need for social distancing.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 76; Noes 4.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney,

Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist:

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lynch and Mr McAleer.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr Allister.

Other

Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Carroll and Miss Woods.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>[95.0%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>[97.1%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>[66.7%]</i>

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods [Teller, Noes]

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch [Teller, Ayes], Mr McAleer [Teller, Ayes], Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2020-21 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 31 March 2020 and the further detailed information laid on 30 April 2020.

7.00 pm

Committee Business

Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a motion from the Committee for Finance to extend the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 2 December 2020, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22).

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance to open the debate on the motion.

Dr Aiken: The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill passed its Second Stage on Monday 16 March and should complete its Committee Stage on Wednesday 18 May. The Bill's main intention is to introduce a range of statutory measures relating to the conduct of special advisers and the functioning of government. The Bill is of concern to a number of Committees. It was not, therefore, clear at the outset to which Committee the Bill would be referred following Second Stage. The Bill is primarily of concern to the Committee for Finance and the Committee for the Executive Office. However, the Committee for Justice, the Committee on Standards and Privileges and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee all have an interest in the provisions set out in the Bill. The Chairpersons of the relevant Committees met on Wednesday 26 February to agree a position. The Committee received an overview of the Bill from the Bill's sponsor, Mr Allister, at its meeting the same day, and the Bill was subsequently referred to the Committee for Finance on Wednesday 18 March 2020.

In normal circumstances, the Committee would have sought an extension to the Committee Stage until late October in order to have sufficient time to take evidence from relevant stakeholders, receive the considered views of all other relevant Committees and provide the Bill's sponsor with the opportunity to formally respond to the evidence presented to the Committee before reporting to the Assembly. Members are, of course, aware that these are far-from-normal circumstances, and the current pandemic has created a lot of uncertainty in all aspects of our lives. For example, the second Vote on Account will come to the Committee in the near future in advance of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Committee will also have to schedule time to consider the Main Estimates, probably in early autumn, in advance of an unprecedented Budget (No. 3) Bill. Urgent essential Committee business, such as Budget legislation, may result in some of the Committee scrutiny of the Functioning of Government Bill having to be extended beyond what would normally be required. There is potential for essential business to take up

considerable time in other applicable Committees, which may result in those Committees being unable to report to the Committee for Finance in time to meet an October deadline. The Committee considers it essential that it is afforded sufficient time to exercise its scrutiny role to the full. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I ask that the House supports the motion to extend the Committee Stage to 2 December 2020.

Mr Lynch: I want to make a number of points. As the Chair has said, Committee members have already agreed to the extension. Therefore, we will agree to it in the Chamber. Finally, I want to lay out our position. The Bill seeks to bring into legislation matters that are being addressed through codes of conduct and guidelines.

Mr O'Toole: As Seán Lynch and the Chair of the Committee have outlined, we have already agreed in Committee to the extension, so I support the motion. Just briefly, it is worth saying that Mr Allister's Bill is important in that its subject is important. It is important that we scrutinise it and discuss it. The intention of his Bill is clearly to deal with issues that arise from the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scandal. That is why it is worth us giving proper consideration to the Bill in slower time, once we are, hopefully, through the worst of the COVID-19 crisis.

There are bits of the Bill that I and my party are interested in and agree with the intention. There are other concerns about specific issues and provisions in the Bill, so it needs to be examined in detail. That is why it is important that we have time to take evidence from stakeholders in slower time and to scrutinise it in the context of the RHI inquiry findings. I support the motion to extend, and I hope that we are able to give the Bill the time it needs for proper scrutiny.

Mr Allister: I have no objection to scrutiny. It is important. I express the hope though that, though we are fixing a date in December, there is nothing to ail the Committee completing its work before that. It is my hope that that will be possible. We take our first evidence tomorrow, and I hope that we can finish well in advance of December.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I invite the Chair of the Committee to respond before I put the Question to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken: From what we have heard from Members of the Assembly, we are content, if the Assembly so wishes, to go to 2 December.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 2 December 2020, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22).

Adjourned at 7.10 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr John Dallat MLA

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Speaker would normally seek for tributes to be paid at the earliest opportunity after the passing of one of our colleagues. Members will be aware that he was planning to do so for us to pay our respects to the late Mr John Dallat, Member for East Londonderry. However, the Dallat family, understandably, expressed a desire to attend and to observe those proceedings, and clearly that is difficult for them at the moment, given the wider restrictions that are in place. Following discussion with the Speaker's Office and the SDLP, on behalf of the Dallat family, it has been agreed that the formal tributes will be postponed until a later date. I am sure that Members will agree that this is the right thing to do in the circumstances. We do not wish to make it any more difficult for the family, and the Speaker would like to express to the SDLP and to the Dallat family his thanks and appreciation for how they have approached this sensitive matter at this time.

Standing Order 18A(5): Suspension

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The first item on the Order Paper is a motion to suspend Standing Order 18A(5). It will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate on the matter.

Mr O'Dowd: I beg to move

That Standing Order 18A(5) be suspended for 12 May 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 18A(5) be suspended for 12 May 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As there were Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated. The motion is, therefore, agreed.

Executive Committee Business

The Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I beg to move

That the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to bring —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry to interrupt, Minister. I just need to make a bit of a business announcement.

Ms Mallon: Sorry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is all right. The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate. I now call the Minister to open the debate.

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. As you can see, I am very excited to have this opportunity to bring before the Assembly this statutory rule, which will remove electrically assisted pedal cycles (EAPCs) in Northern Ireland from the regulatory process and bring us into line with the Republic of Ireland and Britain, as well as many other countries in Europe. Northern Ireland is currently the only region within these islands that requires this type of electric bike to be registered, licensed and insured as a motor vehicle. The rule is made under powers contained in the Road Traffic Order 1995, and I will briefly set out the background to this rule.

An electrically assisted pedal cycle — or e-bike, as it is more commonly referred to — is a bicycle with an integrated motor that can provide assistance to a rider whilst they are pedalling. Currently, such e-bikes are, by law, considered to be motor vehicles and, therefore, require registration and licensing before they can be used on public roads in Northern Ireland. However, they have been exempt from registration and licensing in GB since 1995, and these new regulations will finally bring us into line with that position. The difference in approach has been highlighted by a number of MLA colleagues and many members of the public. I share their desire to make it easier for people to use e-bikes and their frustration as to why we have been left out of kilter with the legislative position in GB and the Republic of Ireland for so long. The regulations set out the requirements that bicycles, tandem bicycles and tricycles must meet in order to be

classified as an electrically assisted pedal cycle for use on public roads. They are being made under powers in primary legislation and state that compliant EAPCs are not legally considered to be motor vehicles. This means that an e-bike is no longer required to be registered, licensed or insured as a motor vehicle, and that riders of these vehicles will no longer be required to hold a valid driving licence. As is the case with ordinary bicycles, legally, riders are not required to wear a safety helmet, but our clear advice is that, whatever sort of bike you are on, you should always wear a helmet.

The principal objective of these regulations is to simplify and reduce the regulatory burden on the public whilst maintaining safety standards. The second objective is to promote cycling as a mode of transport, which is an important one in helping us to achieve the modal shift to a greener, cleaner, healthier society. Since taking up my ministerial post in January, I have been keen to encourage our people to embrace active travel. That is even more important today as we battle the COVID-19 emergency. Whilst we must continue to do all that we can to protect our community from the pandemic, I have set out in recent days how my Department can contribute to the recovery phase by encouraging more of our people to walk and cycle. Last week, I announced in the Assembly that I am creating a walking and cycling champion within my Department. An important role of the champion will be to ensure that we deliver our commitment to increase the percentage of journeys made by walking and cycling. To help achieve that, it is really important that we work collaboratively across the Executive and with councils, communities and citizens right across the North. I am pleased to confirm to Members that the walking and cycling champion has already set up an action-focused group of stakeholders, from both within and outside government, to provide advice and act in a challenge role to my Department. We have also been in touch with several of our local councils, and I am pleased at the level of encouragement and support that we are receiving from them. By working together, we can achieve the change that we desire. We also must not lose sight of the environmental and social justice benefits to our community of people switching from bus or car use to e-bike use. A reduction in car use leads to less congestion on our roads, less damage to our road infrastructure and a decrease in air and noise pollution and greenhouse gases. There is also the potential for fewer road traffic collisions as a result of having fewer cars on our roads. Importantly, an e-bike is more affordable for many more homes than a car.

To summarise, the main objectives of the regulations are to simplify and reduce the legislative burden on those people who wish to ride an e-bike, to promote cycling as a mode of transport that has health and environmental benefits and to reduce congestion in our cities and towns. A lot of change has been forced on us by the challenges of COVID-19 but this can also be the start of a time of change, if we choose it. There is an opportunity to build a better future and I believe that we should seize it. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly and ask Members to affirm the regulations.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the opportunity to speak as Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure on the statutory rule relating to the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern

Ireland) 2020. The Committee considered the proposal for the statutory rule at its meeting on 4 March 2020 and welcomed its introduction by the Department. At that time, I made a public statement on behalf of the Committee that we would give the Department all the assistance that it might need in bringing the legislation forward as it promotes people getting out on their bikes, which is of greater benefit to the wider promotion of health and of ending reliance on cars.

The Committee considered and approved the statutory rule at its meeting on Wednesday 29 April 2020. During our consideration, it was the Committee's general consensus that this debate should be scheduled at the earliest opportunity. As a result, and unusually, the Committee wrote to the Business Committee requesting that today's motion be tabled as soon as possible.

The Committee would like to note that the legislation has been a long time in the making, with the initial consultation having been carried out from 16 March 2016 to 11 May 2016. There is no need to rehearse the reasons why there was such a significant break between then and now, but the Committee recognises that the statutory rule could have been transformational over the last few years in the Executive's plans for carbon reduction. That being said, the Committee is very pleased that we now have the opportunity to approve the statutory rule in the motion. The Committee for Infrastructure is content with the rule.

I would like to add some further remarks on the matter. I welcome the legislation that is being brought before the House today; it is long overdue. The fact that it became law in 1995 in the rest of the United Kingdom and we are only addressing it today is quite incredible and quite embarrassing. As a constituency representative, I have received numerous enquiries from constituents who purchased e-bikes quite some time ago and have been using them in ignorance that they required a motorcycle licence to ride them and could face a hefty fine as a consequence. Once that became known, many e-bikes ended up in sheds and garages across Northern Ireland so, no doubt, cobwebs will be dusted off and batteries will be charged in anticipation of the new regulations. I may even be tempted to trade in my road bike for one.

Given the current health crisis and the need for physical activity for the sake of our mental health, making exercise more accessible, as e-bikes do, can only be encouraged. In closing, I want to take this opportunity to ask the Minister, while she is doing some spring cleaning — and perhaps she could do a little more in her Department — to address another anomaly where Northern Ireland differs from the rest of the United Kingdom, which is in respect of MOT exemptions for vehicles that are over 40 years old. The Department has already consulted on that and, given the current situation with regard to MOTs, it would be timely to address it sooner rather than later. I welcome and support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin seo. I wish to speak in favour of the motion. I welcome the opportunity to do so, obviously, because of the situation that we are in. This is a good opportunity for us to conduct some of our business. As MLAs we have a scrutiny role and I want to, with your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, use this opportunity to discuss some of those things.

I welcome the motion. The Minister knows that we have discussed it in the Committee on a number of occasions. I see this as part of the broader activity in relation to bringing forward legislation and everything else. I welcome the deregulation, which will assist in facilitating a shift towards a more sustainable transport culture in the North. We have seen people out using their bikes during the crisis for essential travel as well as for exercise.

As the Member who has just spoken said about her constituency, I have seen people in Armagh dusting off their bikes, dust flying out the door and cobwebs flying down the roads. I welcome seeing people out. If we are serious about a shift and change, and tackling congestion, air pollution and everything else, this is the start of the process. I welcome that. Making e-bikes more accessible will reach out to a wider audience. E-bikes are better than conventional bikes for travelling longer distances. People may not consider that, but that is something that we need to encourage. I would like to see the Minister talk a wee bit more about that and encourage that.

10.45 am

This is an opportunity to step up our commitment to sustainable transport. Other countries are setting up pop-up cycle lanes. Dublin, for instance, is extending pavements and cycle lanes. I would like to see us follow suit.

I also welcome the introduction of the walking and cycling champion that the Minister mentioned last week. Will the Minister expand on how we are going to deliver on that? Who can engage in that process? I welcome local council involvement, but I think that there is a broader programme: there is a large cycling fraternity out there, and I would like it to be given the opportunity.

One of the key deterrents to active travel and using bikes is safety. Will the Minister consider best practice in other countries? Perhaps the introduction of physical infrastructure, such as bollards, would give people more confidence to use bikes and to be on the road, especially in cities. I ask the Minister to prioritise the uptake of walking and cycling, and their sustainability.

We have talked about congestion and air pollution. Perhaps the Minister will expand on some of the things that she would like to introduce as part of the legislation to tackle those issues.

I look forward to working with the Department and the Minister in the future. Whilst we welcome the legislation, which is COVID-related in the sense that it is a consequence of what is happening socially and what we are trying to do, will the Minister talk about her departmental legislative framework or what she has in mind? Will she expand on where that is?

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome the regulations. They were initiated, I think, by our former Minister Mark H Durkan. Unfortunately, we have had the hiatus of the past three years. I am not sure what Mr Hazzard did in his time, but, thankfully, we are here now.

I welcome Mr Boylan's remarks in relation to this being COVID-related, because it is strange to me, and to many observers, that the Infrastructure Department is the only Department that has not received any COVID-19 funding. I ask Mr Boylan to use his good influences with his party colleague the Minister for Finance, Mr Murphy, because

for this to be successful and to play a part in the reduction of carbon emissions, as the Committee Chair referred to, infrastructure will be required to encourage more people to feel safe on the roads, as Mr Boylan rightly said.

There has been a substantial increase in the number of cyclists on our roads, but e-bikes will open up the opportunity for cycling as a pastime and hobby, and as a method of travel to and from work and shops. They will also allow cycling to be much more inclusive for people with disabilities, older people and people who find some of the hilly landscapes in our towns and cities a wee bit more challenging than others. They will, therefore, be of great benefit for a variety of reasons.

The Minister is to be congratulated for bringing forward these regulations so early in her tenure. I ask that the cycling champion is empowered and enabled to campaign ferociously for councils and planning departments to take on board the needs of cyclists, in general, and e-bike users and others, in particular, when designing open spaces and putting regeneration moneys into our towns, cities and rural villages. Therefore, Minister, we are very supportive, as you can imagine, of these regulations. We look forward to seeing many people out and about, enjoying the fresh air and having a safer and more sustainable method of travel, that is much more inclusive and open to all.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome this change in our legislation. It is badly overdue.

Battery technology has changed hugely over this last number of years, but our regulations were stuck in the past and, as a result, those who had bought an e-bike found themselves in a ridiculous situation where they had to register it with the DVLA, almost like a moped, and have vehicle insurance. Like other Members, I had constituents coming to me, surprised that they were breaking the law when they used their e-bike. Yet, to all intents and purposes, and to most reasonable people, it was just a bike with a very small battery to assist those who may need assistance to cycle and to enable them to travel further.

It is ridiculous that this legislation was not in place some time ago. I understand that, in England, the current legislation was passed in 2016. We have wasted some four years, and it is regrettable that the absence of the Assembly meant that we could not modernise our legislation to provide what the public needs, meet their demands and remove unnecessary bureaucracy. I thank the Minister for dealing with this issue early after taking up the reins at the Department for Infrastructure.

Cycling is important as a means of travel, to reduce congestion and pollution, particularly in our cities, and for the health of individuals. My colleague Danny Kennedy was perhaps the first Minister to take the issue seriously. He recognised that there are multiple benefits to cycling, and he encouraged the development of cycling lanes and networks widely throughout Northern Ireland. Cycling needs to be developed further, and this is a small marker along the way. Hopefully, we will see other developments.

On the Committee, we picked up the impression that this legislation may be delayed. I do not know whether that was from the Executive or the Business Committee. I was very concerned. That would have been unnecessary, and indeed there was a failure to recognise that it might help during the COVID crisis in which we now find ourselves. It is another means for people to travel to work safely and avoid difficulties

in social distancing. It is important that we recognise that, along with the other multiple benefits that come from the use of e-bikes. They allow people who can cycle a little to cycle more, and those who can cycle a considerable distance to cycle even further. I suspect that even more people will use e-bikes to cycle to their place of work.

I am thankful that this anomaly, whereby Northern Ireland was the only place in these islands where all that bureaucracy governed the purchase of e-bikes, will finally be rectified, and the e-bike will be treated as it should have been, as essentially a bicycle with a small battery-assisted mechanism for travel.

I am pleased that we have finally reached this point and I expect, as every Member does, that the whole Assembly will support this and, very shortly, it will be approved. Those who thought they had bought a new bike and could use it, will now be able to do so legally and without unnecessary bureaucracy.

I support the Minister in bringing forward the legislation.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister and her Department for the statement and for bringing these regulations before the Assembly.

As the infrastructure spokesperson for the Alliance Party, I welcome the statutory rule. The only regret I have is that the collapse of the previous Executive prevented this legislation from coming into place many years ago.

E-bikes are an important cog in the active travel wheel. My party and, in particular, my colleague Chris Lyttle, who is the chairperson of the all-party group on cycling, have called consistently for Government support for active travel. Chris and others put the wheels in motion a number of years ago to release the brakes on that legislation, which will, hopefully, freewheel through the House today. I would like to thank Chris and others for their dogged determination to ensure that we have, now, reached the moment when we will finally resolve the farcical situation, which has been outlined by other Members, whereby e-bikes currently need to be registered, licensed and insured. The legislation will change that at last.

Northern Ireland's rolling hills are a source of great natural beauty, but they also put off many people who would otherwise like to cycle. E-bikes would go a considerable way towards making cycling a viable option for commuters and tourists of all ages and abilities. That is why the legislation is to be welcomed.

The COVID-19 pandemic gives us more reason than ever to make serious inroads in promoting active travel. Today's legislation on e-bikes must be only the start of that journey. More people would cycle if bikes were affordable. That is why, last week, I called on the Minister to investigate discount vouchers in order to encourage people to invest in cycling. More people would cycle if there were cycle lanes that made them feel safe. That is why I call on the Minister to bring forward plans for pop-up cycle lanes as soon as possible. Finally, more people would cycle if there were somewhere secure to store their bike when they arrive at their destination. I urge the Minister to follow up on the motion by investing more of her capital budget in cycling infrastructure and properly funding the Belfast bicycle network plan, Northern Ireland greenway strategy, and other key infrastructure, not just in main cities but to

reach beyond those areas in order to make cycling a viable option in towns and rural areas across Northern Ireland.

With regard to the greenway strategy, at this point, I should declare that I am a former member of Ards and North Down Borough Council. The council has developed greenway schemes that are ready to be progressed, but are still waiting on funding. I urge the Minister to release that funding and enable those schemes to proceed, linking Kinnegar to Donaghadee and the Comber greenway to Comber town centre, Newtownards and, then, onto Bangor.

Two further points need to be addressed. It is welcome that the regulations will be passed. Can the Minister for Infrastructure detail when the changes will actually come into effect? Many people have asked me when they will actually become legal. Furthermore, are plans afoot to enact legislation to cover electric scooters and skateboards? Whilst I cannot imagine myself on the latter, both are increasingly popular and viable commuting alternatives for people in Northern Ireland. Legislation to deal with those issues should be brought to the House at the earliest opportunity, whilst also safeguarding other road users and pedestrians. With e-scooter trials now due to commence next month in parts of England, and public-hire schemes already up and running in places such as Munich, which I visited last year, we need to ensure that Northern Ireland is not left behind again as it was with e-bikes.

Change is happening to how we travel. We ought to embrace and enable it with the necessary legal safeguards. Otherwise, people may end up literally moving faster than this place can keep up.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Chris and others are due to speak in the debate. Chief amongst them is Mrs Martina Anderson.

Ms Anderson: I welcome that we are, now, at the point to give approval to the statutory rule. I welcome the comments that were made by my colleague Cathal Boylan and, indeed, the Chairperson and others. Look: this moment is not the time to rehearse why the Assembly collapsed — I will not do that — and why there will not be a return to the way things were. Now, we need to encourage more people to cycle. I certainly concur with some of the comments that have been made. E-bikes are one way in which to encourage that.

It is no secret, as the Minister said, that our cities have become heavily polluted as our car-dependency culture has led to severe congestion. For example, research indicates that drivers in Derry, my hometown, lose an average of 58 hours a year in traffic. Unfortunately, too many people in Derry have to travel to work — even to Belfast — but that is another matter. You will be glad that I will not go into that issue today. Having listened to the comments that have been made in the Chamber, I believe that, generally speaking, most people experience the negative effects of congestion.

That is not only frustrating and time consuming, but it also hurts our health — as has been indicated — it hurts the environment and it hurts the economy. We do need to adapt to a better and a healthier way to get around, and the e-bikes will contribute to that.

11.00 am

On the issue of health, transport emissions are a large cause of air pollution, especially in urban and built-up areas, and contribute to many deaths throughout the year. My home town, Derry, was one of the cities that the World Health Organization identified as having excessively safe levels of particle pollution — they did not reach that safety level. Those particles, as we all know, contribute to strokes, heart disease, lung cancer and respiratory infections. So, with regard to the environment, as the Minister has said, transport emissions in 2019 represented 22% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the North.

It is clear that if we want to grow the economy in an equal, inclusive, healthy and sustainable way, then it is vital that we make all of the necessary changes. This statutory rule and e-bikes will help towards that. We can contribute to growth by changing the way we travel and we can change that by changing our mindsets. We can also encourage that through this statutory rule and by working collaboratively across Departments, councils and with communities who, unfortunately, too often bear the brunt of bad decisions that contribute towards pollution.

This statutory rule facilitates a move towards a more sustainable transport culture, a healthier lifestyle and helps to create a cleaner air strategy that will be welcomed by everyone. I am sure that this statutory rule is going to be supported by all of the parties and independents. I thank the Minister for bringing the statutory rule to us.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Minister, for bringing this statutory rule before the Assembly at this time, when we are all clearly in agreement that one of the lessons — perhaps one of the few positives that has come out of the coronavirus crisis — is the fact that it has made us re-examine in quite profound ways how we live, how we work and the things that we value. It is worth saying, and like the Minister, I commend the Committee, which worked in order to ensure that this statutory rule came before the Assembly quickly.

We should not pat ourselves on the back too much given that it is a quarter of a century since this change was made in GB. We are behind the curve on the modal shift from driving, congesting our cities and making a move towards cleaner, more active travel. It is critical that we make that move and get ahead of the curve, and that is why I welcome everything the Minister has said and has done in her Department in the last few weeks, both before and during the COVID-19 crisis, in order to foment and make permanent some of the changes that we have seen.

We have seen a 70% reduction in congestion on our roads. Clearly, it is not realistic that when, hopefully, we get back to a slightly more normal run rate for our economy, congestion will continue to be down by 70% down. However, does anyone in Northern Ireland or in this Assembly seriously think that it is acceptable that we should go back to the levels of congestion that we experienced in our towns and cities before this crisis? I sincerely hope not.

It is encouraging to hear colleagues agree about the importance of moving towards greener, more active travel, and agree about the benefits of measures including wider pavements, pop-up cycle lanes, pedestrianised streets and quiet streets — the Minister has been out in front calling and pushing for this. While it is good that others in

the House are committed to this, it is important that we, as an Assembly, follow the warm words of today with real action. It is easy to stand up and say that we are in favour of cleaner, greener travel and that we are in favour of cycling, cycle lanes, quiet streets and pedestrianisation. However, there will come a time when we seek to implement these changes, both at Assembly and local council level, when there will be interests who will tell us that a street cannot be pedestrianised or there are reasons why a pop-up cycle lane should not be imposed.

There are reasons why it is totally fine for cars to park in cycle lanes all around Belfast and in other towns and cities. There are reasons why we can get away with continuing to be behind the door — to use a local colloquialism — when it comes to moving towards active travel. I welcome the fact that we are doing this relatively quickly with the Assembly being reformed, but if we are going to do things properly, we need to get real about actually making changes. We also need to get real about funding those changes. I echo what my colleague Dolores Kelly said about funding the Department for Infrastructure because it is not just about cycling or walking, it is about public transport and long-term investment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the fact that the Principal Deputy Speaker has intervened, which gives me the opportunity to conclude my remarks in good time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Very good, because you were wandering far, far from the Minister's regulations. *[Laughter.]* It was more of a general overview on environmental policy than the regulations, but that is OK. It is on the record.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for bringing this statutory rule to the Assembly today. Like everyone else, I welcome it.

I want to respond to the comments from the Minister's colleague. It is important to note, and I am sure that the Minister is aware, that £95 million is being held centrally for transport issues related to COVID-19. The current allocations, in response to COVID-19, have been agreed by the Executive, which the Minister is part of, and are based on need rather than departmental allocations. I just want to point that out.

Going back to the motion, and as others have said, the statutory rule will reduce congestion on our roads and get people out of cars and onto bikes. It will create more options, which is very welcome, for journeys in rural areas, where it is hillier and more difficult. Whilst this is a step in the right direction, the right infrastructure is needed to encourage more people to get out of cars and to cycle.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Kimmins: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: I know this is straying a bit, but I am just curious about why the Department of Infrastructure is treated differently from every other Department by the creation of a central fund. I am just curious around that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is straying very far from the Minister's regulations. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Kimmins: That is maybe a question for your colleague, because she is part of the Executive that agreed the budget. It is not really for me to answer.

I will go back to my point around infrastructure for cycles. Whilst that includes cycle lanes, it is important that we also look at the provision of proper cycle parking facilities that are safe and secure. It has been raised with me that there needs to be better provision in town centres. I ask the Minister to consider working more closely with the councils and maybe give them more authority to help to develop that. Again, I thank the Minister for bringing forward the statutory rule.

Mr Harvey: Minister, I noted a few points, when reading the legislation, that you could maybe clarify. This legislation requires a visible tag on e-cycles. Is this part of the frame or is it just a label on the motor to prove its legality? Can a consumer purchase a motor and fit it to their own bicycle without having to obtain a single-vehicle test from the Department if it is an approved kit? Is there an age restriction to riding one of these cycles or will the rules mirror that of other bicycles? The limit on power on the electric motors is 250 watts, which means you can do a maximum of 15 miles per hour. I assume that any power above that will mean that the bike is a normal motorcycle.

Mr Lyttle: As a member of the Alliance Party, which has a long-standing commitment to sustainable active travel, and as Chair of the all-party group on cycling, I welcome and support the introduction of this legislation to exempt e-bikes from licensing, registration and insurance.

The all-party group (APG) on cycling was established in 2013 to promote and improve cycling policy and provision. We have actively engaged with cycling organisations and government to advance this aim and to work on this particular issue. We were inspired and cajoled to do so by the late Tom McClelland who was the Northern Ireland representative of Cycling UK in the early days. I would like to put on record our ongoing recognition of his work on cycling in Northern Ireland.

I believe that the APG on cycling was one of the first, if not the only APG, to provide a written response and oral evidence to an Assembly Committee inquiry into the benefits of cycling. We have already facilitated early engagement between cycling organisations and the Minister on a wide range of issues, including this particular issue, which I am confident has encouraged the Minister to act decisively in support of active travel provision.

That we are celebrating the introduction of regulations that were first introduced in Great Britain in 1995 is, however, a stark reality check on the extent to which progress on the Northern Ireland bicycle strategy and cycling revolution has stalled. The cycling strategy was introduced by Danny Kennedy, with the assistance of Rodney McCune, and it does show how far we have to go to realise the full extent of the ambition and the provisions of that strategy. I believe that five Northern Ireland Executive Ministers have been in place since these regulations were introduced in Great Britain in 1995, so it is far from just the Executive hiatus that has stalled these provisions. Since then, the delay of these regulations has led to financial loss for providers that had invested in e-bikes and, most importantly, opportunity loss for people who need the extra help that e-bikes allow to enjoy the benefits of cycling and that they will gladly now have access to.

It is regrettable that it appears to have taken a global pandemic to inspire a tipping point in appreciation of the benefits of walking and cycling, but we must, as colleagues have said, positively embrace this opportunity. I welcome the national and regional Government statements in support of active travel, but it is vital that this leadership is now supported by decisive action and investment.

We look forward to hearing how much of the £2 billion and the initial £250 million of the UK investment that Northern Ireland will receive and allocate to active travel, and what specific actions the Minister will be taking on pedestrianising streets, new cycle lanes and in what timescales. I can suggest a few enhancements of the Comber greenway, including the Connswater Community Greenway, and a few other areas in east Belfast if the Minister needs any suggestions.

In closing, I ask the Executive, the Minister and the Assembly to work to ensure that the introduction of this legislation is merely the restart of the cycling revolution in Northern Ireland.

Miss Woods: I support the motion. It has been a long, long time coming. Indeed, as we have heard, it has been since the mid-90s, 25 years too late. It is also, as many have said, a crucial part of sustainable transport, helping to deal with congestion and air pollution, and it promotes active travel, exercise, well-being and leisure for those who can afford it. Mr O'Toole has done a great job of highlighting the issues outstanding, so I will not labour this point any further, but commitments and statements have been given. There is now a need for resourcing and funding as well as making what will be difficult decisions.

The Green Party's petition on this issue had over 2,000 people sign it, and, thanks to this and a certain Nolan programme, awareness of the differences between the regulations here and the rest of the UK and the EU increased publicly. We learnt that the PSNI could fine you up to £1,000 and issue you with six penalty points if you are found to be out for a cycle on the road on an e-bike not meeting the requirements. We even saw the suspension of the sale of e-bikes here a few years ago because of the confusion that arose due the absence of the legislation here, with some businesses unaware that when they sold an e-bike to a customer they had to treat it differently.

Shops did not know what to advise their customers or answer the queries on tax and insurance and sitting a test, and all of this occurred because the Executive and Assembly was not functioning.

The Department did want to change the regulations in 2016, as we have heard, but, without a Minister, that could not happen. So, whilst I welcome the regulations finally being laid here and thank the Minister for bringing them forward as well as responding to my letters and lobbying on this issue, I hope that there will be some communication sent out to those suppliers and shops who sell and deal with e-bikes to confirm that the legislation is now finally up to date in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Department will continue to issue communication to that effect to the wider public.

I also support calls that, in light of the pandemic, have been made for a better and safer cycling infrastructure around Northern Ireland, for the pursuit of reallocation of road space and for changes in the way that we need to travel. I reiterate the importance of supporting greenway

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schemes and their roll-out in conjunction with communities and the councils, which had been planned, drawn up and consulted on in the past few years. As a recovering member of Ards and North Down Borough Council, I was involved in that, as was my colleague Andrew Muir.

11.15 am

I wish to give special mention to two constituents who have lobbied consistently for change here while the Executive were not sitting and thereafter. I know that they are very pleased to see this day come. Having bought their e-bikes in 2016 for a considerable amount of money, they put them in storage in October 2017. They have not been out since. So, to Sam and Anne Graham, I hope that you can fully enjoy your e-bikes now, knowing that you are not breaking the law, finally ending the farce of the past few years.

I welcome and support the motion as a small part of dealing with transport issues, getting around and climate breakdown.

Ms Mallon: I want to place on record my appreciation to the Committee for Infrastructure for its support and for the speed with which it reviewed and agreed the regulations. I also want to thank the all-party group on cycling, which has been pushing this agenda. I also wish to thank Members for their contributions.

I share the frustrations articulated by a number of Members, including Miss McIlveen, Mrs Kelly, Mr Beggs and Mr Lyttle, about the delay in introducing the regulations. As has been pointed out, the then Environment Minister, Mark H Durkan, tried to move on this issue in March 2016. However, it could not be progressed because of the suspension of the Assembly. I agree that, as I think Mr Lyttle put it, it has been an opportunity lost. Today, however, we are in a position to move the regulations, and all Members have indicated that they can support them. To answer Mr Muir's question: if the House affirms the regulations, they will come into effect tomorrow.

All Members pointed out the range of health and environmental benefits of e-bikes. I agree with Miss McIlveen that the regulations are required now more than ever. During the COVID-19 crisis, we need to make exercise more accessible. As Cathal Boylan said, this is an important step forward in the shift to more accessible and active modes of transport. I agree with him, and with all Members, that this is the start of the process.

I also agree with Dolores Kelly, Cathal Boylan and others that the particular advantage of e-bikes is that they can be used for longer journeys, they can be used in hilly areas and they minimise the effort that people have to make when cycling. Therefore they are particularly advantageous to those who are older or who, whatever their age, are not as fit as they would like.

I also agree wholeheartedly with Roy Beggs and Ms Anderson about the importance of cycling and e-bikes in tackling traffic congestion, in lowering air pollution, and in reducing the damage to our roads. I also agree with Ms Anderson that cities are hit particularly hard by traffic congestion and air pollution. What this issue does is to reinforce the inextricable link between place shaping, the environment, the economy, health and social justice. One of the appealing things to me about these regulations, and about this agenda, is that more people can afford

e-bikes than could ever afford a car. Therefore it is a very important issue for accessibility and social justice.

Responding to some of the technical questions from Mr Harvey, I can tell him that the age limit is 14 and over and that the plate has to state the power of the e-bike so that people can check. I assure him that, yes, the maximum speed is 15.5 miles an hour. However, as the vehicles cannot go above that speed, a safety element is built in. I agree with Miss Woods on the importance of communicating to retailers and the wider public the change in the regulations and the time frame for their coming into effect. I have done some posts to that effect, and I encourage Members to help me in getting the message across.

All Members spoke about the importance of active travel. I was committed to the active travel agenda before the outbreak of COVID-19. I recognise, as Mr O'Toole pointed out, that it is really important now. It is not just an environmental necessity; it is now a public health necessity. As part of that process, Members will be aware that, this day last week, I announced that my Department was appointing a walking and cycling champion. I am pleased to confirm that, in that time frame, we have set up the group of stakeholders and that it has met. We have engaged with several councils around Northern Ireland and are getting very positive feedback.

I agree with Ms Kimmins that this will not work if we do not work in collaboration across the Executive, with the councils and with communities. I am committed to that agenda and will continue to do that. As part of that, this legislation is an important step forward. In the coming days, I will announce a number of interventions to try to get a quick change on the ground to facilitate, promote and drive this agenda. However, as Mr O'Toole pointed out, when you are advocating and bringing about change, you will meet with resistance. I need every Member and political party in the House to stand with me in advocating that change and to explain to people why it is important; indeed, why it is essential.

Infrastructure has shown that it is key to responding to the crisis. It has played a key role in the health fightback and it is key to the green recovery. As New Zealand is demonstrating and recognising, investment in infrastructure is critical to kick-starting an economy. We will continue to play our role in that, but it will require Executive support and endorsement. Members will see that that theme is clear in the pathway to recovery that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will announce shortly.

Mr Lyttle referred to the Barnett consequential that could come across from active travel. I regret to inform the House that, as soon as that announcement was made, I made immediate enquiries. It is not new money. Unfortunately, as I understand it, there will be no Barnett consequential, but I am committed to doing what I can in my Department, and I know that my Executive colleagues share that commitment.

Mr Muir raised the issue of scooters and Segways. This legislation does not cover those types of electrically propelled vehicles. I am looking closely at what is happening in England. The Department for Transport is running pilot schemes, but there have been a number of collisions and fatalities involving those vehicles. So, although I will continue to keep those vehicles under review, I have to be mindful of the need to promote the

active travel agenda while maintaining road safety. I assure the Member that I am watching the situation closely.

Mr Boylan asked about my legislative agenda. I have shared a number of the priorities with the Committee. These include: road safety, mobile phone use while driving and trying to do more on the issue of drink-driving. I have also said that I am actively exploring biennial MOT testing. If that is the direction in which we go, it will require legislative change. I am also very aware of the vehicles of historical interest that Miss McIlveen raised. I know that Mr Harvey is very passionate about those vehicles as well, and I am actively considering that issue. I recognise its importance. My approach will be to introduce legislation. I will also try to change policy where I can and bring about change on the ground. It is a three-pronged approach.

As I said, Infrastructure has played a key role in responding to the crisis. It is playing its part in the health fight by turning our MOT centres into COVID-19 centres and it is key to the green recovery. To deliver on that, we have to have ambition. We also have to have resource.

I want to acknowledge on the record that this journey was started by Danny Kennedy. Mr Beggs is absolutely right. Danny Kennedy drove this agenda when not many in the political world were doing so. He tried and he made some progress. The difference now is that the context is fundamentally changed. We all recognise that we will not go back to the way things were. To do so would be a failure. We are going to a new normal, and active travel will play a key role. I look forward to working with every Member in the House as we realise that agenda and improve the lives for citizens across the North.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

I propose, by leave of the Assembly, that we have a brief suspension in order to prepare the Chamber for the next item of business, which is a statement from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I ask Members to leave the Chamber briefly to enable the necessary changes to be made while social distancing is maintained.

The sitting was suspended at 11.24 am and resumed at 11.35 am.

On resuming —

Ministerial Statement

Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-making

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yesterday evening, the Speaker received correspondence from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in which they asked to make a statement to the Assembly on the Executive's approach to coronavirus decision-making. The First Minister and deputy First Minister said that, given the importance of the statement in setting out the way forward in relation to the current crisis, they would be grateful if Mr Speaker could give consideration to their making the statement under the same seating arrangements and question format as have been put in place for the Ad Hoc Committee. In light of the particular circumstances, Mr Speaker was content to put in place those arrangements on an exceptional basis. The Business Committee therefore agreed to table the motion to suspend Standing Order 18A(5) that the Assembly agreed to earlier today. That means that we have flexibility to go beyond an hour, which I may allow, depending on the number of Members wishing to ask a question.

Before I call the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I remind Members that, in light of the social distancing being observed by parties, I have relaxed the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they want to ask a question. Members must still make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, but they can do this by rising in their place or by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to, please, be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be allowed. That is for fairness, to ensure that Members from smaller parties who are further down the list get an opportunity to ask questions too. As per the arrangements for the Ad Hoc Committee, Members who ask short, focused questions will be invited to ask a supplementary question.

Finally, I advise Members that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will make a joint statement and either or both may respond to a particular question, although I say to both of them that they do not have to respond to all of them.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you very much for the opportunity to update the Assembly today. Since 7 April, updates have been provided by me and the deputy First Minister and by Executive Ministers, and the junior Ministers brought the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations to the Assembly for approval. The common themes and threads across all of our updates have been the devastating nature of COVID-19, the need to protect our health service, the interventions made by Departments and the need to follow the restrictions to keep safe and protect the NHS. Today, we wish to update you on our latest review of the restrictions and our decision-making process for coming reviews. They have been discussed in detail by the Executive, and we will publish 'Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-Making' later today. This is our five-step plan to aid recovery and renewal. Our discussions have been guided and assisted by inputs from the Chief Medical Officer and

the Chief Scientific Adviser, and we have been grateful for their advice. The Economy Minister is working on a further document dedicated to economic recovery that will dovetail with this road map and will be published in the coming days.

The Executive agreed that now is not the time to lift restrictions, and we made that announcement on Thursday of last week. We also agreed that the time is right to set out our thinking and explain how we will approach decision-making, what we will take into account and how we see the restrictions easing. As of today, we remain subject to restrictions that no one wants to last a day longer than is absolutely necessary. They are measures that we would not contemplate in normal times. We know that they have a significant effect on people's ability to live their life the way they and we want, so, today, we wanted to set out for the Assembly our thoughts on how we might move forward when the time is right.

Just as there was no rule book for putting the restrictions in place, there is no set pathway for lifting the restrictions. Countries and jurisdictions are taking some tentative steps to lift restrictions. Some have published criteria and principles, and some have outlined a timetable. Each is different, and there are good reasons for that. Our decisions must be based on what is happening here, taking account of our particular circumstances within the four nations approach. Differences and nuances between the jurisdictions in the United Kingdom will emerge. The four nations discussions will, however, continue, and, to that end, we welcome the announcement by the Prime Minister on the establishment of a new, joint biosecurity centre to monitor the levels of infection and identify specific actions in regions where spikes occur. The devolved Administrations will participate in and contribute to its work. We will also continue to engage, of course, with our counterparts in the Irish Republic.

We will remain focused on the health and well-being of our people, our society and our economy as a whole. We will be driven by science. We will be driven by the need to emerge from the current arrangements in the safest way possible, step by step. That will require a series of judgements and decisions as we move through. Last week, we considered very carefully the effect that restrictions are having on our people. We know that you want clarity on things that matter very much to you, such as visiting relatives, going to work and taking your children to school. We decided collectively that the time is not right for making major steps. We will continue to consider whether some modest steps can be taken, and, if they can, we will do that ahead of the next review. Against the background of last week's decisions, we fully appreciate that people want as much information as we can give on the next steps. That is why we are publishing our document today, and we will move forward with care, step by step, with a clear goal of emerging from the situation safely.

We must continue to avoid the health service being overwhelmed. COVID-19 spreads in a way that is not visible in real time. A person who catches it today may not have symptoms immediately but may well need hospital treatment in coming weeks. The things we do today, as citizens, have an impact in the near future, and, if restrictions are lifted too soon or in a way that we cannot control, we will see the negative results of that in the days and weeks ahead, so we will also keep our approach and

document under review. As we move forward, we will address any oversights and make improvements to how we consider the issues that matter to our people — to their lives, families and livelihoods. We will not take a set-in-stone approach, if there are things we can do better and do differently.

COVID-19 spreads at a rate that is not visible in real time either. Before the restrictions were put in place, each person with COVID-19 was likely to pass it on to two to three people; the time it was taking for COVID-19 cases to double was shortening; and we were faced with a growth rate that could have overwhelmed the NHS. The current transmission rate of each person infecting, on average, fewer than one has been achieved because of the restrictions being in place and the adherence to them. We cannot allow the transfer rate to rise to uncontrollable numbers, and that is why we cannot lift the restrictions too early and must continue to ask everyone to play their part every day. The transmission rate — "R", as it is more properly known — was key to the review last week. It will continue to be central to the judgements we will make in the coming weeks.

The Executive's document sets out the way in which we approach each review of the restrictions. We must work our way through on the basis of risk-assessed, incremental steps and judgements, but it is equally important that we develop a very clear vision of where we want to be as we emerge from the crisis. The document sets out an indication of how key aspects of life may progress through different stages as we emerge from this situation. They will not necessarily all move forward at the same time, and they will move forward only if it is safe to do so. In reaching our judgements, we will think about the outcomes that we need for the health and well-being of our people, the economy and our society. We will preserve, rebuild and develop aspects of our life that are most important to us. We will think about what our people have been through, their experiences over this last few weeks and how we can best assist with the adjustment to the "new normal".

There will be a new normal. COVID-19 will not be beaten through restrictions. We may be living with it while clinical interventions are being developed.

We may have to embed social distancing even further in how we live our lives and conduct our business as we emerge from the restrictions. We may need to take some steps forward and some steps back, but we will not return to the world as we knew it before COVID-19 for some time.

11.45 am

We were clear at the outset of the crisis that we could not entirely insulate ourselves or our economy. We have lost loved ones, and we have lost neighbours. Our health system has been under tremendous strain. We have lost livelihoods, and some businesses, tragically, will not survive this. We have to consider the impact that this dreadful disease has had on families, on communities and on the way we live and socialise. That is why our document sets out very clearly the factors that we will take into account in forthcoming reviews of the restrictions that have been introduced and measures that have been taken so far. We will base our judgements on the health and well-being impacts of COVID-19, and we will have a clear focus on NHS capacity. We will take account of the impact that the restrictions have on non-COVID health and well-being

outcomes, the societal impact arising from the restrictions and the impact that the restrictions have on our economy.

We know that some will want us to set a date for the lifting of restrictions, but we will not be driven by a timetable. We know that some will be disappointed by that. Many will want answers immediately around specific scenarios that impact on them most directly, but our road map will not answer every query. It provides an indication that people can use in looking ahead and anticipating how the next weeks and months might evolve. It is understandable to want as much certainty as possible, and the Executive agreed last week on the need to enhance messaging around what people are already permitted to do within the legal framework. There is scope for Departments to be more clear with different sectors of the economy, citing examples such as construction and manufacturing. It is not surprising that people err on the side of caution and are not engaging in activities that are, in fact, permissible, safe and beneficial. That is understandable, given the extremely unusual and challenging times that we are living through. The Executive supported messaging aimed at giving people the knowledge and the confidence to enable them to live their lives as freely as possible within the existing legislative constraints and in line with public health advice. The Department of Health has committed to taking this forward with other Departments.

I want to stress again, before handing over to the deputy First Minister, that our restrictions have worked. They have saved and are saving lives. We are asking a lot of our people, and we appreciate that the restrictions have health and well-being consequences too. We want everyone to be able to go out, visit relatives, socialise and enjoy everything that this place has to offer. We need to get people back to work when safe to do so, and we will get there. It will take time, but we will get there.

I end with a word of thanks for everyone who is working hard to keep us safe, including those in our blue-light services — the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service — and those who provide our food, look after us in the NHS and care for the vulnerable. We are grateful. Thank you.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): Just before my remarks, I put on record my condemnation of the threats made against Members of the Assembly in recent days. Those threats have no place in our society and should be condemned by each and every one of us.

We are grateful for the opportunity to come before Members today to set out the basis of Executive decision-making and our agreed pathway to recovery. We are, as we all know, in the midst of the biggest challenge of our lifetime. This invisible killer — this killer virus — is causing loss of life and great hardship to many people throughout our society, across this island and, indeed, across the world. Let me start by saying that we do not underestimate the impact that the severe restrictions have had on everyone across society. It is fair to say that, in general, public support for the unprecedented measures that have been introduced has held firm throughout recent weeks. There is public awareness and understanding that, by imposing these essential containment measures, we have collectively slowed down the spread of the virus and we have collectively saved thousands of lives. I acknowledge all those from across our communities who have lost their

life to coronavirus and send our heartfelt sympathies to their loved ones from the Chamber today.

As when we went into the crisis, our pathway out of the coronavirus pandemic will require collective effort and working with the community. We appeal to the public, please, to be patient. We understand that you want your family life back; to visit and socialise with your friends and your family; and to give your grandchildren a hug. We know that you crave more leisure time and being able to get out and about and to exercise like you used to. We acknowledge the need for businesses to be able to open and operate safely so that we can all get back to our jobs. We understand that parents want their children to have the educational opportunities that they deserve and on which they thrive. We accept that many people rely on public transport for work and for socialising, and we totally understand the pressures on the vulnerable, who want to be more self-reliant.

The restrictions remain in place at this time because they are necessary and because they are working. Our top priority remains saving lives by combating the spread of the virus through staying at home, social distancing and regular hand and body hygiene to kill it. Our biggest threat in the fight against COVID-19 remains complacency. Until a vaccine is found, we must co-exist with the virus and therefore radical change to how we live our daily lives for some time. Life as we know it has changed. We will have to continue to adjust. Going forward, our whole society will be proactive in targeting risk to reduce the spread of the virus or further outbreaks. That requires us all to change our behaviour. When we are in a position to move out of the lockdown slowly and carefully, we will keep you updated every step of the way, as we begin to restart community life and reboot the economy to keep people in work and keep society functioning.

While the restrictions are still absolutely necessary, it is important that we give people hope for the future. Today we set out our pathway for future recovery, which gives an indication of how the restrictions on different aspects of life may be eased at various stages. There are three elements that go hand in hand. First, the incremental five-step approach represents the risk evaluation that we will make at each stage in order to restart family, community, educational and economic activity. Secondly, those decisions will be evidenced by medical and scientific advice from our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser. Thirdly, that expert advice and evidence will be benchmarked against guiding principles or criteria and international best practice, including the World Health Organization's. We will then make risk-based assessments of the positive and negative effects of the restrictions in place and decide what restrictions to ease and when to ease them.

As we have said before, however, we will not keep the restrictions in place for a moment longer than they are required. We have built in the necessary flexibility to respond to the complex emerging situation on the basis of all relevant evidence. We have to be prepared to step forward and, if it is needed, to step back. We must take into account the evidence and the analysis relating to the pandemic. We must take into account the capacity of the health service and social care services to deal with COVID-19 but also that of the other health and social care services that are needed to look after our people. We

must take into account the impacts on our society and our economy, which cannot remain in lockdown indefinitely. As we go forward, we cannot fight the pandemic blindfolded. Controlling the rate of transmission is absolutely critical. A restriction or requirement should be relaxed only when there is a reasonable prospect of maintaining R at or below one. That means that we need to have in place testing, tracking and tracing arrangements to enable us to lift the restrictions safely. Our testing capacity has grown, and more sectors have been able to avail themselves of it, but it will be a cornerstone of our ability to lift the restrictions as we move forward.

The capacity of our health service to deal with coronavirus is vital. Outbreaks must be minimised in special settings, such as health facilities and our care homes. Preventative measures must be in place in workplaces, schools and other places to which it is essential for people to go. Importation risks must be managed also. We must ensure that communities are fully educated, engaged and empowered to adjust to the changing way of life as we co-exist with the virus until a vaccine is found.

Coronavirus respects no politics or borders, and I am glad to report that there is very good cooperation taking place North/South between the Executive and the Irish Government at all levels. The memorandum of understanding signed by the Executive and the Irish Government on 7 April is aimed at getting North/South cooperation and coordination right in the response to COVID-19 across the island, recognising the island as a single epidemiological unit. Data modelling across the North and South has, of course, been undertaken.

These are the most challenging times that any of us can remember. It will only be by working together in government and across society that we will minimise the suffering and the hardship caused by the pandemic, tackle the challenges ahead and set about achieving social and economic revival. There will be times when there are strongly held but contrasting views on the right decisions and next steps. We, as an Executive, have set out our criteria and how we will apply them to our decision-making, and we will continue to communicate them with the public and the community. We will also listen carefully to understand the views and experiences of everyone who has been impacted at this very difficult time.

The Executive will continue to put in place measures to help those in need during the lockdown. We have taken steps to help those who are shielding through advice lines and food deliveries. A COVID-19 community helpline has been contacted by over 12,000 people to date. Access to food parcels continues to be the main reason for calling the helpline, and over 57,000 food boxes containing essential items have been delivered directly to the doors of vulnerable people who cannot access food through online shopping, family, friends or local support networks. We have put in place economic interventions for our business sector. Our schools are providing places for the children of key workers and vulnerable children.

The restrictions will be lifted in stages, when the timing is right, and that will not be in the too-distant future. If people continue to adhere to the public advice, which is working, we will be able to remove the restrictions more quickly and restore your freedoms without further delay. The Executive will continue to work as hard as we can with common purpose. COVID-19 does not discriminate, so we must

remain united in common purpose against the biggest threat facing our community and the world. I thank all of our health and emergency responders and everyone who continues to work on our behalf. They work on the front line, and their selflessness and courage at this time know no bounds. We will continue to provide updates on our thinking, and we are grateful for the opportunity today to provide the Assembly with this update.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for coming to the House to make the statement.

It was remiss of me, particularly given that two of the Members involved are in the Chamber, to overlook condemning utterly the threats that have been issued against elected Members of the House, whether it is Ms Dillon from Mid Ulster, Mr Aiken from South Antrim or Mr Beattie from Upper Bann. We all stand with you and condemn utterly those who harass or harangue the democratically elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I echo those remarks of condemnation of the threats against colleagues. Nobody in a democratic society should have to face such threats.

I want to start by referencing quickly the problem in our care home sector. This is fast becoming a care home pandemic. The owners and staff of homes are doing all that they can with the resources that they have, but the virus continues to spread. That needs urgent and immediate attention, and I hope that we can get some clarity today on the special measures that will need to be taken by the Executive to address this as the emergency that it is.

I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for providing me with some advanced sight of their statement. I saw it about 10 minutes ahead, which I welcome, but I suggest, on behalf of Members, that a short recess to allow people time to read the statement would have been good. There is quite a lot of information in it to digest in 10 minutes, although we tried our best.

The urgency of the remarks is critical, because the public are hungry for information. This affects their lives, livelihoods and communities, which have been shut down and isolated. They all — we all — want to know when this will stop. The “when” is important. It would have been useful to have timescales in the document with the proviso that they could be changed or moved due to circumstances. People would be understanding if the times needed to change due to medical or scientific evidence, but, without timescales, the document could be seen as being almost an aspirational one, which may not satisfy the public’s thirst for knowing when things might change.

People will want as many specifics as possible. The recycling centres, the parks, the shops, safety at work, schools reopening when the time is right and, of course, visiting families and loved ones are all high priorities, and it would have been important to get a better steer on those things.

12.00 noon

As everybody knows, knowing who has and does not have the virus is critical, and that will require comprehensive testing, tracking and tracing arrangements. Is that

envisaged as a result of this plan being published today? Can you give us details on how that will happen beyond conversations and modelling between the medical officers, North and South? Can you give us the real, practical steps that will now take place on an all-island basis, given that the virus does not know any borders?

Mrs O'Neill: Sorry, I thought that you had the statement an hour beforehand, so apologies for that. Our door is open to discuss this further outside the Chamber today with you, as Chair of the Committee.

We all know that care homes are where all the attention needs to be right now. The Health Minister described care homes as where the battle currently is, which means that there can be no stone unturned. We need to throw everything but the kitchen sink at making sure that every resource that is necessary in care homes is put in place. We discussed that yesterday at the Executive and agreed to come back with a fuller paper on those types of measures and what additionality we can bring to put the effort into the care homes. There has been a lot of emphasis on improvements in support for care homes, and the Member registered that point himself. Financial support and trying to transfer staff in are crucial, but we have to keep asking ourselves every day: are we doing enough? Is enough being done?

For me, one of the things that will be really crucial to us being able to advance and support care homes more is to get to the point of universal testing. I have made that point. When there is an outbreak in a care home, there should be a rolling programme of testing that allows you to monitor that situation very carefully. We do not want to be sitting, at any stage of this, regretting that we did not do enough, so the test, trace and isolate policy is crucial to all that, as you know. We have to get to the point where there is capacity to test in care homes in a universal way, and we are having that conversation. At the Executive on Thursday, we expect to have a further conversation about how we can build on the additional finances and the resource in terms of people. We need proper personal protective equipment (PPE) for all staff in care homes, and all these things need to be looked at in the round. As the document outlines, there will be an urgent expansion leading to an intensive programme of testing for residents and staff in care homes, and that will commence immediately. That is a good thing.

What about the light at the end of the tunnel? I get that. We all have families and we are all in the same boat, and everybody wants to have something to look forward to. We looked very carefully, as a whole Executive, at the issue of putting timelines and specific dates to certain areas, and we decided against that for the reason that people want light at the end of the tunnel. We do not want to build up expectation and then have to move, because all this is dependent on the R rate being at a lower level. Clearly, at the moment, with the R rate sitting at somewhere around 0.8 or 0.9, we are not in a space where we can comfortably move to do anything.

To give people an idea and indication of time, we said that we will review the regulations every three weeks. The next review has to happen by 28 May. However, we have built enough flexibility into this programme so that, if the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer were to sit down tomorrow with the Executive and say, "We are now at 0.5 in the reproductive rate", that will allow us

the space to move in advance of the three weeks. The document talks about the different stages and the five-stage approach, and you could very quickly be at step one. That gives people an indication that, provided that the disease keeps going on a downward trajectory and the R rate keeps coming down, we could be in that space in the very immediate future. Hopefully that gives people an indication of time. The flexibility that we built into this gives us the ability to move as we see fit. Hopefully that gives people an understanding of that. It is about trying not to build up expectation. It is about saying, "Here are the five steps. Here is the guide. Here are the types of things that are included in that". It is important that we highlight to people things that can perhaps happen in each step in the time frame.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: On a point of housekeeping: the ministerial statement landed in the Speaker's Office at seven minutes past the hour, and we reconvened at 37 minutes past the hour, so they were within the accepted time frame for the statement.

I gave the Chair of the Executive Office Committee some leeway, because he is the Chair of that Committee, but the questions will have to be much more focused. I have 20 Members wanting to ask questions, and we are seven minutes into an allocation of an hour. Does the Chair want to ask a supplementary?

Mr McGrath: I do, for clarification. The different phases can be seen in the document. Under the heading "Current Position", is that where we are today for all the headlines; we are not moving, today, to phase 1; and it will be three weeks before we review moving from the current phase to phase 1?

Mrs Foster: Thanks, Colin. There is no silver bullet and no flick of a switch. We have to do this in a stage-by-stage process. Taking that into account, what you see in the document, where it says "Current Position" in all the boxes, is where we are today. We will continuously look to see whether we can move to stage 1 in relation to the different boxes. As Michelle said, we have built in the flexibility to move whenever the advice comes to us. I think that that is a better way of doing this. I understand the desire for dates. Believe me, I understand that. However, we had to balance up putting down dates and then not having the flexibility to move in a different way, and that is why we put that in.

We will give notice. Thinking about businesses in particular, if we are saying that they can reopen, obviously, they will need time to get ready. That is what this plan is about as well — to give them an indication of the movement.

The Member asked a specific question about track and trace, which I want to pick up. Contact tracing is, of course, very important to us, moving forward. The contact tracing service NI is very well advanced. On 27 April, a pilot phase of contact tracing was begun to permit testing and further development of the system and processes. The process is evolving, and we are learning from that pilot. A transition phase following on from the pilot commenced on 11 May. We are preparing and developing the delivery of phase 2 of the project, and we hope to implement that on 18 May.

Contact tracing is key to us moving ahead in our steps. I really want to make that point. It is part of what we are planning for. Whilst you may say that some will see this as

an aspirational document, I have to say that I think that it is very clear on what we are relying on for decision-making. If you look at the document, you will see that it is very clear that we are looking at evidence and analysis, the capacity of our health service, and a risk assessment of the impact on health, on the economy and, indeed, on society. We realise that the restrictions are having a big impact on family life and on people meeting their friends and that that has an impact on mental health. We recognise that, and we want to challenge it and to make it part of our risk assessment.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement and the document that we received. We all just want life to be back to normal. I cannot wait until I hug my little grandson, my mum and dad and my family. I am looking forward to that, but I understand that we need to be measured in our approach.

First Minister, you mentioned that the Economy Minister will bring more detail on economic recovery. Will you expand on the point about our plans for economic recovery?

Mrs Foster: When we say that we are planning for the future, of course, we are making sure that health is to the fore and that we take into account the impact on the R number, which Michelle referred to, to make sure that we move forward on a step-by-step basis. However, we are also conscious of what the Member said in reference to hugging her grandchild, the society point and the economic issue. COVID-19 has had what the Economy Minister, if she was here, would say was a “devastating impact” on the Northern Ireland economy. We have to look at how we mitigate that impact and then how we plan for recovery. In the near future, she will bring plans on the recovery element of that, and that will sit alongside our road map.

The very good work of the Northern Ireland engagement forum should be remembered. Something that we did here, which was unique to Northern Ireland, was to set up that forum between employers, trade unions, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Diane’s Department. It produced a very good piece of work about how you could work safely, and that guidance should be read in accordance with going back to work. Just today or late last night, the Department for Business on the mainland brought forward guidance about safe working as well. All of that has to be read in conjunction with the road map that we are bringing forward today.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Over the last seven or eight weeks, many companies and communities have helped in the fight against COVID-19. I would like your assessment of that. I do not think that we, in Northern Ireland, are aware of just how many people have continued to work hard to deliver for communities and our health service through this crisis.

Mrs Foster: The deputy First Minister may want to recount visiting some of the firms that have been involved in repurposing to deliver PPE, for example; many firms are doing that. There are many firms whose furloughed employees are out helping in the community, delivering food and all of that. We should be very proud that so many of our firms — rather than just saying, “Right, we are on furlough. We are not going to do anything” — have repurposed to provide PPE and other assistance to the community. We are very proud of those firms, and I send a message of thanks to them from the Chamber.

Mrs O’Neill: I have visited Bloc Blinds and other companies that have repurposed. There is a lesson for everybody for the future. We could face a second wave of this pandemic or another pandemic of some kind, so there is a lesson to be learned in the need to be self-sufficient. The companies that have repurposed may have a future in continuing to produce PPE to make sure that we have sufficient levels if and when we ever require it again. All credit to those companies that were in a very bad place — they were having to furlough their workers and they were anxious — for very quickly turning it around and being able to help the health service and keep people in employment. There are only good news stories out of that, and all credit to those companies. However, for me, there is something in this around how we make sure that, for a future crisis, we are self-sufficient in the things that we may need and that we have supply chains here that can deliver for us.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Ministers for their statement. I welcome the amount of work and thought that has gone into this. I also welcome the fact that it will be based solely on the evidence that is presented at any given time. I do not think that that is aspirational; I think that it is sensible. This virus is no more a respecter of calendars than it is of borders, so that is the right approach. However, it raises questions about having the capacity to test and trace to provide the evidence, which will need to be dealt with speedily. I, too, am concerned about the care home sector. My question on that was largely answered in response to Mr McGrath, but that sector needs urgent attention.

The document states that communities must be “educated, engaged and empowered” to deal with the issues as we move out of this. I would like to raise the issue of our harder-to-reach communities. I was very saddened to hear in recent days of the death of a foreign-national worker in Dungannon. They are some of our most valuable workers. However, we know from testing in the South of Ireland that there are particular clusters emerging within the food-processing sector, largely due to the fact that those are often worked by people who live in multiple-occupancy housing. They have language issues and need particular supports. I ask that you work with the Public Health Agency — I have raised this with them — to ensure that those harder-to-reach communities are reached out to and engaged with on an ongoing basis.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair of the Health Committee for raising this very important issue. Of course, we send our sympathy to the family of Ms da Silva. I was very shocked to hear that she lost her life in Dungannon in that way. He makes a very good point about how we reach out to those who do not have English as their first language. We could maybe look at our summary document and communications going out in different languages.

We know that there are many languages in Dungannon and Portadown and places like them. It is important that we are able to communicate with everybody who lives in Northern Ireland. It is one of the reasons why Michelle and I, very early on, wanted to have signers with us at all of our press conferences. We have been able to reach out to the deaf community in a very real way by doing that.

12.15 pm

The Health Minister and the whole Executive are very focused on our care homes at present. We have asked the Health Minister to bring forward another comprehensive

paper on what is happening in our care homes on testing and staffing levels. We understand that thousands of staff hours are going into the private sector nursing homes to try to assist them. New guidance is out in relation to COVID-19. We know that most of our care homes do not have COVID-19 and it is about making sure that it does not get into those homes. There is a whole strategy around our care homes now. We accept that those people are our most precious and vulnerable residents and we want to make sure that we do all that we can. As Michelle says, when we look back, we will not say that we should have done something else at that time. We are very much engaged on the issue of care homes, as is the whole Executive.

Mrs O'Neill: Just to add to that, I also want to send our condolences to Ms da Silva's family. Clearly, there will have to be a full investigation into what happened in her circumstances and I encourage her employers and the HSE to do that. I say very clearly to all workers that nobody should be working in unsafe practice. Very good work has been done by the Labour Relations Agency, working with trade unions and employers, to develop guidance and make sure that it is put in place, that it is solid and that it is understandable. It needs to be translated into work practices.

No one should be going to work where their health is compromised in any way because things have not been put in place. I am not saying that that was the case in that instance — I do not know — but there needs to be an investigation. Workers in general need to be protected. There is guidance there and it needs to be adhered to. I encourage anyone who has concerns about their workplace to bring them forward to the HSE, whose remit is to investigate those complaints.

The Member's points about nursing homes are well made. There is not one person in this Chamber who does not share the concern and the anxiety about making sure that everything is done to support our nursing homes. That is why it is important that, in addition to what has been announced around funding and the other issues that Arlene mentioned, the Executive have confirmed that the Department of Health will implement an urgent expansion and an intensive programme of testing of residents and staff in care homes. That expansion is expected to commence immediately. That is in addition and, then, on Thursday, we intend to look again to make sure that we do everything that needs to be done.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Are you happy enough, Mr Gildernew?

Mr Gildernew: I have a short supplementary question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Go ahead.

Mr Gildernew: As part of the consideration of what else could be done, may I ask the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to consider the hospitals' current discharge policies to see whether there is more that can be done to delay the discharge of people who are, potentially, either tested positive for COVID-19 or waiting the result of a test, to provide a breathing space for the care homes?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to take that on board and incorporate that into the conversation. The current policy is that everyone will be tested but that discharges are not

delayed because of waiting for a result. We will be happy to pick that up.

Dr Aiken: Before I make my remarks, I want to say that attacks on anybody, not just MLAs but journalists as well, fundamentally undermine the principles of democracy in Northern Ireland and everywhere else in the world and should be, rightly, condemned. I thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for your remarks.

I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their joint statement. The UUP join you in your words of thanks and support for our vital key workers, especially those in the blue-light services, the NHS and our social care staff. I appreciate that it cannot be easy to be part of a five-party Executive. *[Laughter.]* You can smile at that. Today, however, it is good to see a growing sense of cohesion, which is something that everybody in Northern Ireland wants to see. That is echoed by everybody in the Assembly, which wants to see that cohesion continuing to grow.

The Ulster Unionist Party has been calling for a recovery plan for many weeks. This is, indeed, a start. We welcome the paper, and the fact that the Economy Minister is working on a new paper on the economy. We cannot see that soon enough. On what date are we likely to see that economy plan? Will it address the concerns of the many companies that are fighting for survival? In particular, will you give a commitment to talk to the Finance Minister to make sure that the money that is being held centrally is now used to support our businesses so that we have an economy to pull ourselves out of in the autumn?

Mrs O'Neill: To state the obvious, five parties working together around the Executive table was always going to throw up challenges. We are all adults: we will have disagreements and different takes on things, and we will have different emphasis at different times, but our job is to try to work through that as best we can. I think that we have been able to do that through the crisis that we face as a society, because none of us escaped it. It is impacting on us all.

The plan that is being put forward today is the five parties working together. It is us trying to present a way forward, and it is about us taking the approach that we think best suits our local population. It is also about trying to give people light at the end of the tunnel and an assurance that there is a way forward and that we will soon get back to some semblance of normality. As I said in my initial comments, life as we knew it is not going to be the same again. That having been said, we are adaptable people. I have no doubt that we will be able to adapt, but our job will be to try to limit the spread of the disease. That is why social distancing is going to be with us for some time to come.

As an Executive, we were solely focused, initially, on the public health crisis and saving lives. Subsequently, of course, we have had to turn our minds to the recovery. What does that look like? What does recovery and renewal look like? When you look at some of the assessments around the local economy and the damage that this is doing to the economy, you will, rightly, be concerned about how we are going to build our way out of it.

One of the initial assessments put forward talks about how the economy growth rate will be at 25% to 30% below normal. That shows the size of the challenge ahead of us. We have, therefore, been working our way through what

economic recovery will look like. That is being done within the Executive, because we want to be focused only on the public health message.

We will continue to work as a collective Executive. We do not have an unlimited pot of funding, as Members know, and we have to make wise choices about how we use the funding that we have. It is important that we come at those things together. To be upfront, we will not be able to do all of the things that we want to do, but we will do our best with people, and we will do our best to work together across the Executive on identifying the priorities. That will come from identifying a plan, establishing how we are going to recover and trying to fund that as best we can.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for your answer. One of the issues that we have talked about is dealing with the pandemic on an all-island basis. Some initiatives that are being taken in the Irish Republic, particularly in relation to VAT and VAT reduction, are likely to severely impact our transportation sector and hospitality sector. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister make a commitment to talk directly to the Westminster Government about making approaches, particularly around air passenger duty (APD) and VAT reduction, so that when we come out of this situation, our economy is at least able to compete on a level playing field?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that question. Due to our membership of the UK, we have been the beneficiaries of significant economic schemes. I think the Member will acknowledge that. We wait to hear what the Chancellor has to say today in relation to the tapering of the furloughing scheme. That is critical, because certain sectors, even by our step-by-step plan, will not be out of lockdown by the end of June, which, of course, is when the furlough scheme is due to come to an end. I hope that we will see, today, a tapering of that scheme so that our businesses will continue to benefit from it. That is very important.

Of course, we have also intervened in a number of ways. We have our £10,000 scheme, our £25,000 scheme, and the hardship scheme that is about to go online. Furthermore, we are looking at more schemes relating to rates. We will come to the House on that very soon.

You asked a specific question about Diane's paper. I hope that that will be out within the next week, so that we can dovetail it in with the road map. If there are developments in the Republic of Ireland, we will take those up with our Government. If we are at a competitive disadvantage, we will be asking how we address that, and how we help our businesses and sectors to overcome it.

The Member recognises that there are some sectors that will really struggle. The sad truth is that some businesses will not survive. It is right that we are honest about that, but we have to try to ensure that the maximum number of businesses survive. That has always driven the Executive in their economic interventions, alongside those of the Westminster Government.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next person on the list to speak, we are 27 minutes in to our time. I gave some leeway because the first four people on my list are Chairs of Committees. If Members ask short, focused questions, and short, focused answers are given, everyone will get their speak in.

Ms Armstrong: I join with others to condemn absolutely those who have made threats.

I thank the First Ministers. This is not the worst document in the world. Compared to those of other nations, this is a document that the community can look at, but, as you can imagine, people will automatically ask, "When will we go to stage 1?". We are not going to give them dates. There is no point; you have said that. We will do it when it is safe to do so. However, if we are starting to go back to work, a number of people are concerned and will ask, "What about childcare?" and "What about education? We cannot go to work unless our kids are looked after." What support and hope can you give to those people?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you for your comments. We will try our best to produce something. We wanted to produce a very user-friendly document that people can take away and look at for themselves.

I absolutely understand the desire of people to have a date. I want to have dates. I wish I could say, "On X date, this is going to happen", but, unfortunately, because it depends on the science and on the spread of the disease, we have to be very careful about that. However, we can give people indications. The first category talks about where we are today. We hope to keep this under review. At the very outset, 28 May is the next review date.

I have two things to say. If people continue to comply with the regulations and stay at home — that is our message — and, if the R-rate comes down, we will be in a position to move much more quickly. We will not hold on for a day longer. If it means that we review this every day, that is what we will do. We do not want to hold onto very stringent measures for a day longer than necessary. I give you that assurance.

In my opening comments, on the issues of education and schools, I talked about parents' desire to have children in school. We understand all that. Realistically, it will be September before schools open again in the normal fashion. Even at that, it will not be in their normal fashion, because we will have to look at how that is done. The Education Minister will speak with the trade union movement, because we need to look at how we can manage that.

There needs to be very careful planning around what parents can expect to see in September, or when schools start. It is a very confusing picture for children themselves, especially for those who are transitioning from P7 into first year, or those who were supposed to be doing exams. All those things are now in the mix, and it is quite confusing for people. The Education Minister will give more detail in due course.

Childcare will be one of the most challenging pieces in how we move forward. A lot of workers have been furloughed, but when that scheme comes to an end, how will we manage? How are they going to survive? These are big challenges and I do not have all the answers and they are challenges that we are going to have to work our way through. If we are to allow people who are able to go to work, because they cannot work at home, how can we support them with the childcare sector?

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister for her answer. Let us think about mental health, when we come out of this. I am so sorry for anyone who has lost someone during

this terrible time. We have lots of grieving families who have not been able to grieve properly. A lot of our front-line health workers are seeing the cold face in the deaths that have been happening.

A lot of people have lived in isolation; for instance, widows who live at home and single parents. What will we be able to do to support society as it comes out of this? As we know, it will not go back to normal. It will not be a case of flicking a switch today and step 1 will start. There will be progression. How can we support the mental health of society and those who are struggling so much at present?

12.30 pm

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her very relevant question. When we think of mental health, it can sometimes conjure up an idea in our head, but the Member is right to mention the elderly in that context because, at present, many elderly people are really struggling with isolation, their families not calling in, and not being able to go to some of their meetings. They are really struggling at present. There is a specific piece of work to be done on elderly people's mental health. I hope that we will be able to do more on that. Mental health, whether it be that of NHS workers — real concern has been expressed and the term "post-traumatic stress" mentioned in that context — or, of course, young people, for whom we were concerned before all this came upon us — we had actually set up a new and improved Executive subcommittee to look at well-being and resilience as opposed to dealing with the aftermath — is an issue on which we are very focused. The Health Minister is in the process of appointing a mental health champion. He brought a paper to the Executive to seek our agreement on that. Of course, we were in full agreement with it. It will sit across the Executive. We hope that the champion will be able to help to identify the pinch points on all those issues, but, my goodness, we are very alert to the fact that it will be a huge job of work.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the document. It has been released only one hour and already there are questions about the detail and the need for indicative timings to allow businesses to plan effectively. How do the Ministers respond to those people who have already raised concerns about the detail of the document?

Mrs Foster: We expected that to happen. What we have tried to do is give examples of what will happen in work, retail, education, travel, families, sport and culture, and, then, to give indicative pieces on moving to step 1 and step 2. We have set out the current position. Michelle has already articulated the fact that if we are given the advice to move sooner than 28 May, we will do that, because part of looking at the regulations is very much to look at their necessity and whether they are proportionate: in other words, do we need them or are they doing more harm than good? We will have to look at all those issues.

At the front of the document, we have set out the actual decision-making process. The good thing about the Executive's meeting on so frequent a basis — not that I am saying that it is not a good thing for the Executive to meet so often, of course — is that we can review that on an ongoing basis. I hope that it will be very much a living document and that we can come back and talk about it, and that we can communicate with people. Part of the

document is about the partnership approach with the community out there. We are telling them what we will do and I hope that they will respond positively, because compliance is key. If people comply, we will be able to move faster. That is the reality: it is very simple, but is actually the reality. We know that there has been fraying around the edges on compliance. We are saying, "Keep the faith, be patient, and we will be able to move to step 1".

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister for her response. Obviously, the fact is that each jurisdiction — each devolved Administration — has taken its own plan based on its own needs. How do you respond, First Minister, to those who say that the United Kingdom is very much disunited in how we are dealing with the issues?

Mrs Foster: I do not see it like that. I see it as a devolved reaction, and, I think, to be fair, the Prime Minister sees it as that as well, even though there has been a lot of noise around the issue. We are working, as I have already referenced, in a UK framework around some of our economic interventions. Therefore, they will have an impact on what is going on, but it is important that we have a localised response to what is going on here in Northern Ireland. That is key and critical for us. I do not see that as being a threat to the United Kingdom at all. In fact, I see it as devolution working in practice right across the UK.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis na hAirí as ucht a ráitis. I welcome the focus that the strategy places on tracing, testing and isolation. The World Health Organization has advised consistently that every single suspected case should be tested and all possible contacts traced. Can the Minister outline how that can be taken forward in an effective way, given the limitations that there have been on testing and tracing, which have meant that not every single suspected case has been tested?

Mrs O'Neill: There is recognition now, right across the Executive, that the cornerstone of our recovery is actually having a fully fledged test, trace and isolate policy that is up and running. Everybody can note that there have been improvements in the capability to test. It is not where it should be yet. However, there are improvements, nonetheless. There is now the capability to test just over 2,000 people per day, but, yesterday, we were told that that will be ramped up by an additional 1,000 tests a day when the AFBI testing comes online. Unfortunately, we thought that it would have been online before now. AFBI will provide an additional 1,000 tests per day.

Alongside that, additional testing is coming forward in the form of another 500 tests per day. Therefore, that is an increase of about 1,500 tests per day on the 2,000 that are currently there. That is, obviously, a far-improved picture, but there is way to go because the linchpin that will carry us through all this is those three things working in tandem. Although I welcome the fact that there have been improvements in the capability to test, I recognise that there is a way to go.

On tracing, I welcome the fact that the pilot programme is up and running and that we will see further advancements on 18 May, which is just next week. Then, it is about the isolation and to look after those people who need to be isolated as a result of all that work. That is what we will wax lyrical about, if you like, in the weeks ahead as we move our way through this plan, because it will be the key to allow us to relax the measures and move forward as

quickly as we can. The more that we can test, trace and isolate, the greater our ability to get the R number down, get transmission down and reduce the restrictions.

Mr Sheehan: I acknowledge what the deputy First Minister and, indeed, the First Minister said earlier about the pilot scheme for tracing, and that it is going to be ramped up. Those countries that have been most successful in combating the virus have followed the testing, tracing and isolating model. However, we are starting from a very low base indeed. Is the Minister confident that testing and tracing can be ramped up to the extent that will allow us to ease the restrictions in the foreseeable future?

Mrs O'Neill: I am confident that we will make sure that it is. This is an essential part of the recovery, and if we do not get this right, we cannot lift the restrictions. Therefore, it is part and parcel of the plan and the way out of this. It is the exit. It has to be done. A number of things are being developed. A conversation is happening about what the app will look like and how it will assist in the way forward. I certainly have a view — I believe that it is the view of the Health Minister as well — that any app needs to be decentralised: people need to hold their own information as opposed to it being held centrally. Those things are all being developed. This is absolutely where the focus has to be to get the policy right and fully functioning. It is key to the recovery.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement to the House. I very much welcome the news that a more comprehensive paper will come from the Executive on our care homes, because we are all incredibly worried about what is going on there and about protecting those who are the most vulnerable in society.

Can the First Minister or deputy First Minister tell us what role the joint biosecurity centre will play?

Mrs Foster: The joint biosecurity centre was raised with us at COBRA on Sunday. The idea behind that is that the centre will have the expertise to look at all the devolved regions. Therefore, if there is a localised outbreak, we can take localised action.

That is why I said that there was recognition in the UK that there might need to be localised interventions. I really welcome the joint biosecurity centre that has been announced by the Prime Minister. They will work in conjunction with the Chief Medical Officers in the devolved regions to make sure that we have the best information possible. Sometimes, people forget that this is “novel coronavirus”: it is new. We are learning all the time about the impact, how we control it and how many people will be immune if they catch it and survive. All of those things have to be explored, including, most importantly, the vaccine. The joint biosecurity centre will be very involved in all of that.

Mrs Cameron: When the Prime Minister refers to taking action to deal with community spikes, does the First Minister envisage that he means there could be different restrictions in different parts of England?

Mrs Foster: Yes, possibly. The idea behind the centre is that they will have more of a granular look at the infection in various places around the UK. Obviously, England is a large country, and there may be differences, as, indeed, there are around the R number. Parts of England

are different from other parts. The east of England has a higher R number than London, for example, which is lower because they are ahead with regard to infection and transmission of the virus. They are down to about 0.5 now, whereas the east of England is around the same as we are in Northern Ireland. There are differences; therefore, the need to be able to react to that and have a localised response is very important.

Ms Anderson: The information that you have released today and the statements that you have made are very clear. It seems that there are five stages and we are going to move through each of those stages when it is safe to do so. It is worth reminding everyone who is clamouring for more information of what you said about the pandemic: it is still there, and it is as deadly today as it was during the lockdown. Can you outline the guiding principles that will ensure that we walk through the five stages when it is safe to do so?

Mrs O'Neill: It was remiss of us not to say that this is International Nurses' Day. It is important to put on record our thanks to all the nurses who are working on our behalf in the most difficult circumstances. “Thank you” to all of them on our behalf.

Thank you for your comment around it being clear. It is only natural that people desire all of the information and want concrete information. I absolutely understand that. It is important that people understand that we are guided by the science but this is what it looks like in each stage as we move forward. When it comes to family and community, for example, a number of people have asked questions. Paula asked about hugging her grandchild: people want to know when that can happen. We want to be able to give that assurance as quickly as possible. If I was pointing people to the stages, I would say that, when it comes to family and community, we are looking at that in the first phase. If everyone is compliant and we get the R rate down, we could be there very quickly. It is important to say that, when we get to that point, groups of four to six people who do not share a household can meet outside if they can socially distance. Alongside that, with the exception, obviously, of people who are shielding, because they have to be protected, families are able to visit immediate family indoors, provided that they can socially distance. It, at least, brings them closer together. People are trying to get their head around that process, and we will try to keep communicating it as best we can.

As Arlene said, we will not surprise people. We will tell them that we are looking at these things and hope to make a decision, and we will move as quickly as we can. The guiding thing to take us through this is the evidence, so it will be science-led. It is about the capacity of the health service to respond and about the transmission. The World Health Organization's guidelines say that the success of any exit strategy has to be that the transmission is under control; that there is capacity in the health service, including the ability to test, trace and isolate; that outbreaks are minimised in special settings, including our care homes; that preventative measures are in place in workplaces, schools and other places where it is essential for people to go; that importation risks can be managed; and that all of that is communicated to the public and people are engaged about the new life as we know it and are able to socially distance and prevent the virus spreading. Those are the things that will guide us.

That gives you your clear guidance. We will work our way through this as quickly as we can, but, all the while, public safety and saving lives will be the number-one priority. That is why we have to be guided by the science.

12.45 pm

Ms Anderson: You referred to the fact that today is International Nurses' Day, so it is appropriate that the statement is being made and the information is coming out on this day. With that in mind, I will ask you about nurses, who, at one time, were on strike and to whom we now show deep appreciation, and about domiciliary nursing. Given the pay scale that those care workers are on, it would be good to send them a signal of our appreciation not only by acknowledging what they do but by taking into account the salaries that they receive. Unfortunately, they are at the lower scale compared with what others receive.

Mrs O'Neill: That is a really valid point, and I think that we are all having conversations now about the kind of society that we want to see at the other side of this and about the fact that the people whom we have depended on most are predominantly a female workforce and predominantly from the lowest-paid workforce. It is important that we have conversations about the type of society that we will live in on the other side of this and about how we value the people whom we rely on so much right now. That is a conversation on where we go next to rebuild and use any resource that we have as best we can. Also, how do we value our health service? The health service is what we depend on to get us through this, and, after the impact that years of cuts and years of austerity have had on our health service, we have big, big building to do on the other side of this. Going into this, we had a health service that was at breaking point, and we will certainly have a more challenging picture on the other side of this.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for giving us the presentation today. First, I echo what the deputy First Minister and Martina Anderson said about International Nurses' Day. We have all been reminded of how amazing a job nurses do. My mum started training as a nurse 50 years ago in the Royal, and I have not been able to see her in about two months. For my mum and everyone else who has been a nurse, it would be remiss if I did not mark that.

I take the point that it is important that we do not get stuck on dates. As a former civil servant, I understand the importance of building flexibility into documents so that you can change your mind later. I am, however, reminded of the phrase that there is light at the end of the tunnel but there is no tunnel. The document talks about the interaction of the R rate with other factors, including contact tracing. Can one of you give me a sense of how that interaction with contact tracing works? Is there a specific number of contact tracers that we need to have in Northern Ireland to relieve certain restrictions? If the R rate is going down from, for example, 0.8 to 0.7 but there are a certain number of contract tracers, does that mean that we can ease restrictions? It would be helpful to have a bit more clarity on that.

Mrs Foster: I hope that the Member will accept that this is the tunnel and this is the tunnel for moving out. He is right to ask about the number of contact tracers you need, depending on where we are with the R rate, and, I am sorry, I do not have that figure that with me. I am sure

that, when the Health Minister comes to the Chamber on Thursday, he will have that number. The Member is right: that is what we need to look at. We will need to be able to trace the virus in the community. The only way to do that is to have contact tracers in place, and we will need to know where it is in the community. Yes, he is right, but I do not have the figure with me today.

Mr O'Toole: My brief supplementary is about the financial aspect of this. The First Minister talked about the furlough scheme. While we have been here debating, Rishi Sunak has announced that there will be some form of extension of the furlough scheme until October. That, I am sure, is welcome, but we need to see much more detail from the Treasury on what that means. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister make representations to the Treasury that that furlough scheme can be flexible for the devolved Administrations, reflecting the fact that we may have a different approach to how we proceed through the next stages of this? The Treasury should be cognisant of that and willing to give us flexibility on how we deploy that here.

Secondly, have the First Minister and deputy First Minister given thought to greater use of Northern Ireland's borrowing powers in how we go about developing the recovery? It was not mentioned in last week's Budget, but there is headroom in our reinvestment and reform initiative borrowing capacity. Will the First Minister and the deputy First Minister give some thought to that?

Mrs Foster: We have already discussed looking at our borrowing with the Finance Minister. At present, he is looking at how much that would allow us to have in order to make the interventions that we will need. Whilst the Executive have made interventions, we know that that is probably not the end of where we need to intervene. I understand that, as the Member said, the Chancellor has indicated that the scheme will be in place until October, which is really good news. The Chancellor has also said that people can come back from furlough part-time, which is also good news, as it gives businesses the flexibility to plan ahead. The Member will know that engagement with the Treasury is through the Finance Minister, and there has been good and open conversation on all those matters. Indeed, all our Members of Parliament speak continually with the Chancellor and all other Departments about the flexibilities needed for the devolved Administrations.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Ministers for their statement, which is a very human one. We can all relate to what they have said. I welcome the way that the Executive are working together. My colleague and party leader, Steve Aiken, made it absolutely clear that cohesion is what we need. There are some people whose sole purpose will be to find fault with the document. Therefore, I hope that you do not find that my question is about finding fault; it is not.

It is welcome that you say that this is not calendar-led, but how do you square that with the Department of Education setting the transfer dates on 21 November, 28 November and 12 December, while the registration for those transfer dates starts on Thursday? How does that sit with your claim that it is not calendar-led?

Mrs Foster: The transfer tests for next year have, as I understand it, been put back by two weeks, so that will not happen until December. We very much hope that we will get to stage 5 before December. Of course, if we get a second peak, we will have to pull again, so I think that that

announcement was made in the hope and desire that we will be at stage 5 by December and that the tests can take place.

The Education Minister is working with the teaching unions, with teachers and with schools to plan for a return to school. Of course, we have a different term time from England. England might decide to send primary- and nursery-school children back to school at the beginning of June. If we were trying to manage that and then, all of a sudden, term time ended, that might be more disruptive than if we used the time to plan for the end of the summer to get children back in a socially distanced way. It will be difficult and challenging for teachers and pupils alike to come back to such a scenario. I worry about sports, for example: what will happen to contact sports? I know that many young people look forward to sport in school, as well, of course, as learning. They enjoy the social aspect of all of that, and where that will be we simply do not know at this time.

Mr Beattie: I will be very brief. The point that I am trying to make is that there is real pressure on parents now, because registration opens on 14 May. It is a financial commitment that they have to buy into, because it is £50 to register for the transfer test and £75 if you do not register on time. Therefore, given the flux that we are in — I understand that we are in a flux; it is not a criticism — is there any way that we can make representations to waive the cost of registering for the transfer test for this year? *[Interruption.]*

Mrs Foster: I hear Mr O'Dowd to my left making some comments from a sedentary position in relation to transfer that I will not pick up on.

On the transfer, I am sure that we can pass that on to the Education Minister to take up with the various bodies.

Mrs O'Neill: Just to put the record straight *[Laughter]*, I, clearly, do not support academic selection, nor do I support the transfer test. I do not think that that is where we should be. This is the most challenging of all years for our young people, and to present them with that in the middle of all this is just not on. That is my view.

Mrs Foster: Well done, Doug *[Laughter.]*

Mrs O'Neill: You did well. You set it up well *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The First Minister referred to Mr O'Dowd as being to her left: that is an understatement *[Laughter.]*

Ms Bunting: I am grateful for the statement. We are witnessing the United States publicly wrestling with the balance between health and the economy: the loss of life versus the loss of livelihood. Both are devastating to families, so what reassurance can the First Minister and deputy First Minister give the business community that we have found the right balance?

Mrs O'Neill: The message is — I think that everybody would understand this, even those in the business community — that the initial response to this was that it was a public health issue and we were trying to save lives. We were also very mindful of the fact that we were speaking to a lot of business organisations about how we move forward. The work that was done around working with the Labour Relations Agency and the trade unions and the business organisations to create strong guidance for workplaces shows that we were working towards trying

to get people back to work when that was possible. What we will have to do in the time ahead is work with business organisations and communicate as we move forward. None of us have been here before. This is not even like a time of recession; this is a very different and challenging space. We will have to work our way through it, but the best way that we can do that is to communicate that with the business community.

It is not “health versus the economy”. That is an important message. A healthy population is a healthier economy, and the two things are interlinked and interchangeable. Our job will be to try to communicate a plan as soon as we can, and that is what we are working on.

Ms Bunting: We have recently seen in the national media that there have been mentions of “clusters” or “bubbles” of friends and family with whom we can meet up. I note — it is welcome — in step 1 that we will be able to meet up with four to six members of our immediate family. What consideration did the Executive give to wider clusters to include friends and how did we reach that number?

Mrs Foster: I think that, with regard to the groups of four to six people who do not share a household, that does not necessarily have to be family; that can be friends. We recognise — indeed, the matter was raised at the Executive — that some people do not have a large family but have a large circle of friends and want to have social contact with those people. That is why that is phrased in the way that it is: so that people can have that social contact for a variety of reasons.

Just in relation to furloughing, the announcement today by the Chancellor extending that to October is important. If firms had had to come off furlough at the end of June, they would have had to make some people redundant. That really concerned me, and, as someone who was Economy Minister during the recession, getting redundancy notices nearly daily, I know that it was a really difficult thing to cope with. I really welcome the fact that the furloughing scheme has been extended, because that means that firms may be able to keep people on furlough instead of making them redundant. We should really welcome that. It gives them a chance then to maybe get their orders up again and to look for new business, particularly in the manufacturing sector. That is something that I really welcome, and I hope that it really helps our economy.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Ministers for what is a sensible and thought-out approach. I note that the strategy recognises the reality and importance of Ireland as a single epidemiological unit. How will that strategy maximise the opportunity and obvious advantage?

Mrs O'Neill: Clearly, we live on an island and have an advantage because of that. We have to use that to help get us through this. We have the memorandum of understanding so we are looking at sharing our modelling. Our two Chief Medical Officers work very closely across the island, but you are right: we are one epidemiological unit. It is good to be able to say that word *[Laughter.]* We are one epidemiological unit, and it is important that we understand, as our Chief Scientific Adviser has told us, that the trajectory of the disease's spread is the same right across the island. The disease knows no borders or barriers, so it is important that we move forward in as joined-up a manner as we can.

We have had North/South engagements with Ministers, including the Tánaiste and us and the two Health Ministers and CMOs. That engagement is crucial as we chart our way through the next period. We are all, across the island, in this together, and we need to work our way out of it as best we can together.

1.00 pm

Ms Sheerin: I am glad to hear you say that engagement is ongoing North and South. Obviously, there are a number of people who live on either side of the border who would, in ordinary circumstances, cross it on a daily basis. Can I assume that there is a plan to continue interaction between North and South?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. We are probably due to meet again towards the end of this week, and we will be talking about this plan and how we will work our way through it. Sorry, I omitted to say earlier that the North/South meetings that we have had have also involved Brandon Lewis, Secretary of State. We have another one of those meetings later this week, and it is important that we are as joined up as we can be throughout this.

Ms Bradshaw: I am sure that the last few months have not been easy dealing with this issue, so I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their work. The document references the wider health impact and the phasing and reintroduction of the usual health and care services, yet there is no detail in the report. Are we to expect a separate report?

Mrs Foster: This is something that we have been focusing on because, as the deputy First Minister said, before this crisis, we had waiting lists of 305,000 people. We know that 9,000 elective surgeries have been cancelled, so there will be a huge challenge around non-COVID healthcare. The Health Minister is bringing forward a paper to the Executive about the reverse surge, if you like, and how we switch on all those services again.

I am sure that many Members have had correspondence from constituents about cancer care, stroke care, screening and all those issues. Indeed, I know that the Member has raised some of those issues. So, it is important that we have that information and that we can then come to the Assembly. As I said, because the Health Minister is coming to the Chamber on Thursday, he may well be able to say more about that then.

Ms Bradshaw: As the deputy First Minister mentioned, the budget and the health service were not in a great way before the pandemic. What support will the Executive give to make sure that the budget is sufficient going forward?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that out of all the money that the Executive have distributed for the COVID-19 response, the bulk of it has gone to Health to be able to combat it. We will continue to work with the Health Minister. Nobody is underestimating the challenges that we have. After three years of the Assembly being down, we were just back in the door. We were working our way through things, and, obviously, COVID-19 hit.

It will be a very challenging picture, but we need to look at how we deliver care. We need to look at all those things. As the previous Health Minister, I brought forward the plan for reform of the health service. That is still relevant and maybe more so now. Our waiting lists were atrocious. We

need to get past that and be able to get people the right care at the right time. That will take us all as an Executive to work collectively to be able to fix that.

On the first point that you made around getting things back to whatever normality looks like in the health service and being able to get those people who had their appointments cancelled back in the door is so important. I have been lobbied by parents of children with cystic fibrosis who normally have their own specialised clinic who are now being asked to go to A&E. That is not a good situation for anyone who is living with cystic fibrosis, for obvious reasons, given its respiratory nature.

People desperately want to know when they can get back to their normal clinics and their normal care. We want to be able to get there. We have to get there as quickly as we can. We have to maintain capability in the health service to deal with any resurgence of COVID-19. As the First Minister said, the Health Minister will bring forward a plan to the Executive around that, and he will communicate that to the Assembly.

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement. I also echo your words about nurses, especially on International Nurses' Day. Not all superheroes wear capes is a saying that could not be any more applicable than to our nurses. Their selfless commitment is amazing, and I take my hat off to every one of them.

Given what you have said today about workplaces and the detail around that, when can we expect more guidance for employees and employers? Who is responsible for ensuring and enforcing workplace safety?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his specific question in relation to guidance. As I have already indicated, the guidance is there already in the form of 'A practical guide to making workplaces safer', which came out from the Northern Ireland Engagement Forum. That gives very clear guidance in relation to safety.

Safety in the workplace is the Health and Safety Executive's remit. The local councils look after some retail outlets and issues. I understand that the Department for Business, Energy

and Industrial Strategy today launched new guidance on getting us back safely to work, so that is there as well.

In relation to our nursing colleagues, today we of course celebrate International Nurses' Day and I really want to send my good wishes to everyone in relation to that in the public sector. But, in the private sector, I understand that those who work in nursing homes get only statutory sick pay if they have to self isolate — because they are in the private sector that is all that they are entitled to. I think that that is something that we as an Executive need to look at. I know that the Health Minister has put in quite a significant amount of money to support care homes — I think it is £6.5 million — but we do want to look at that particular issue because we do value all of our caring staff and it is important that I say that.

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister for her answer. The document states that, under the current position, enhanced messaging around what work is permissible will come out. I look forward to that because clarity is key, especially for businesses. They do not want to break the rules; they want to know what they have to do in order

to keep their employees safe. I raised that issue when I spoke to the Health and Safety Executive last week at the Economy Committee. The HSE said — as you have — that their remit extends only to manufacturing industry and construction and that the rest is for local government and their environmental health departments. However, having contacted a number of those departments this week on the back of that advice, many of them were not aware of that or of the guidance, and probably do not have the people power in place to enforce it. That is concerning. Is there anything that the First Minister and deputy First Minister can do to ensure that the capability is there whenever workplaces go back?

Mrs Foster: I think that we can engage. The local government chief executives' representatives are on our Civil Contingencies Group which, as you know, is part of the gold command dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. We can raise with them what extra they need in relation to health and safety inspections at local government level. There will, of course, be a huge increase in people who are concerned and who will want to make representations, and therefore they will need assistance to be able to do that.

Mr Wells: Many of us welcome the very positive tone from the contributions here today. I think that we are all with you in the very difficult task that you face, but there is always a "but". The "but" is care homes, and I speak as someone with a direct knowledge of what is going on. Why are we not in a position to have up-to-date information as to the number of people in care homes who are affected by the COVID virus; the number of people who have had to go to hospital; and the number of people who have died? Why has that up-to-date information not been given to us daily?

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for his question. I understand why he has a very personal interest in making sure that care homes are something that we take a huge interest in — and not just take an interest in, but take huge actions on as well.

As I understand it, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority has been trying to make sure that it gets the information from the care homes. As I indicated to other Members, there is not the same resilience in the information coming from care homes in the private sector. We are trying to improve the data that we get — and we have made good progress — but I think that it is fair to say that there are still issues around the data that we are getting from our nursing homes, and whether it could be used publicly. You may say to me "Well, I know that X-number of people died in such-and-such a nursing home", but that has to be ratified.

As the Member will know, there are very strict and stringent rules about the data that we can put out publicly. The Office for National Statistics is very clear about that and has rules in place. Whilst we are continuing to work on that and understand the concern, it is important that the Member realises that there are still some issues surrounding the clarity and resilience of the data that we receive.

Mr Wells: Since going public on this issue in the 'Belfast Telegraph', I have received many calls from throughout Northern Ireland. I can tell the honourable Members that the news that will come through from nursing homes will be very difficult to accept and very painful for society. The battle lines in the fight against COVID-19 have moved from our hospitals, which have done tremendously well and

deserve our praise, to the nursing homes. How can the Executive make the strategic decision that they need to make, which is to pour resources into our nursing homes, when we do not have the current figures, which are so essential in making such decisions?

Mrs O'Neill: We need to get those figures because people need a very clear picture of exactly what is happening, the level of deaths as a result of or associated with COVID-19. Also, we currently have a situation where we have the Department of Health figures and the NISRA figures, which leads to a confused picture. That is not an acceptable position. That will be rectified. I noted that the Health Minister said that he will engage with NISRA to try to improve that picture, and that is also important. However, I do not need the figures to know that we need to put every bit of energy into the care homes. I do not need the figures to know that the battle lines, as you rightly said, have been redrawn, and that is where we need to focus all our efforts.

I do not know whether you were in the Chamber earlier when we chatted about this in response to another Member's question. What I said then, stands. We need to throw everything but the kitchen sink at this. On Thursday, there will be an Executive discussion dedicated to the issue, and we expect that the Health Minister will bring a paper on what additional work can be done to support care homes.

Throughout this crisis, we have listed areas where there has been financial support, areas where the RQIA is playing a certain role and areas where trusts are being asked to flag the status of their homes. A lot of work has been done, but, clearly, we need to do more. It is important that we have that conversation on Thursday and then make the strategic interventions that you rightly pointed to.

One of the things that I said earlier — perhaps you did not hear it — is that the Executive have agreed that, as part of our response, and as a matter of urgency, a testing programme will be rolled out immediately across all nursing homes. That will be on a rolling basis, but we need to get to the point of universal testing in every nursing home.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Ministers for their statement. I want to ask about the policing of restrictions as they are lifted. We all know about the public discourse and lack of clarity on the restrictions. This is an issue. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. The police cannot do this alone. How will it be done? What will be the message from the Executive Office? What channels of communication will be used to ensure that people do not relax? The vast majority have abided by the regulations, but people have greatly relaxed, certainly over the past few days.

Mrs Foster: One advantage of the ongoing review of regulations has been our ability to change them if we needed to. As the Member knows, we changed the regulations on travelling for exercise, because the police flagged that up as an issue to us.

At present, we are actively considering whether, as is already the case in England, police should not be the only enforcement agents. We are looking at whether others, such as council officers, could be involved in enforcing some of the regulations.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome that review. There seems to be an issue with the HSE giving clarity and doing regular

workplace inspections. In order to allay some of the concerns that many staff have, are you considering providing the necessary upskilling to employees — for example, environmental health officers or inspectors in the Department of Agriculture — so that they could play a role in the broader inspection of workplaces?

Mrs Foster: What is important is that we have the appropriate person to not only enforce the regulations but educate people. In answer to Mr Stewart, I referenced the fact that council employees will have to enforce the regulations on safety and so on in the non-food retail sector. Is there a role for others? We will certainly consider whether there is a role for the Health and Safety Executive or agricultural inspectors. We will wait to see what the respective Ministers have to say about their role. However, we are actively considering widening the scope of enforcement.

Mr Muir: I thank the Ministers for their statement. The strain on public finances as a result of COVID-19 has been significant. We have seen the bids for additional funds that are coming through from each Department. What engagement has occurred with the UK Government on a stimulus package that would give us some certainty in how we plan? The Barnett consequentialia are coming through, we cannot plan and we need to be able to fund the bids that are coming through.

1.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I expect that there will be an economic stimulus package later on. We have to get people back to work first of all and then see what the impact is and where that stimulus package would be best targeted.

On the Budget process, we have instructed all Ministers to look at their departmental budgets to see what they will be unable to spend because of COVID. Whilst we are having to redirect money to deal with the COVID crisis, there are things that Departments would otherwise have been doing but cannot, and that money should come back to the centre so that it can be used in the most proactive and productive way. Those conversations are continuing.

Mr Muir: One thing that has changed a lot over the past weeks is the way in which we deliver public services. That transformation has already occurred, although a lot more is going to have to take place in the months ahead. What collective commitment will the Executive make to ensure that we fund that transformation so that we deliver public services better than we did before?

Mrs O'Neill: I think that, out of every negative, you should try to find a positive. Perhaps there is an opportunity for us to look at how we do things, how we deliver care in the health service and how we respond in many public services. Part of the NDNA deal was reform of the Civil Service. That is still necessary work. There will be a lot of learning from our ability to respond to this crisis right now that will factor in to all the reforms that need to happen. We certainly need to change the way that we do things. We will have no choice but to change how we do things, but it is important that we do it for the right reasons, that we actually shape things and take the opportunity to learn from good examples. There are things that, if the Department had been asked to do them six months ago, it would have taken years to analyse, consult on, scrutinise and whatever, but it can now turn them round, just like that,

because it needs to do so. Perhaps there are lessons to be learnt in all those things. There always need to be checks and balances, but there is a bit more latitude and agility to allow us to shape things very quickly when we can.

Miss Woods: I wish to join in the condemnation of threats made to Members and journalists.

Thank you, Ministers, for your statement. It raises many more questions, especially about returning to work. No one should return to work unless it is safe to do so, and people need clarity on that and reassurance that it is safe. The document acknowledges that people will be concerned about their safety when travelling to or attending work. On page 8, the Executive say:

“there is an onus on businesses ... and ... others to show how they can accommodate the current social distancing”.

What is the Executive's responsibility for the implementation of guidance to ensure that businesses operate safely? Will there be, through the Health and Safety Executive and councils, an enhanced role in ensuring that employers comply with the guidance, through inspections or closure of unsafe businesses?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. As I said, the engagement forum that was set up by the Department for the Economy has brought forward guidance. That was brought forward in conjunction with a wide range of industry bodies, including: the trade unions; Solace, the body representing local government chief executives; the Health and Safety Executive; the Public Health Agency; and the Labour Relations Agency. That document has been out, so we are actually ahead of other parts of the United Kingdom. Today, as I said, the British Government have brought out new guidance in relation to the United Kingdom and what should happen across there, so I imagine that will be looked at by the Department for the Economy to see what applies to us, here in Northern Ireland, as well.

The Economy Minister will bring forward a paper, I hope, in the next week, which will talk about economic recovery and renewal. As she does that, integral to that will, of course, be guidance on safety and safe working practices. It is important that that is a key part of our effort to get people back to work.

Miss Woods: Thank you for your answer, First Minister. Will the Executive commit to take responsibility for the implementation of the guidance that is issued to businesses?

Mrs Foster: Well, we have already adopted the guidance as Executive policy. Therefore, it is our responsibility, along with the Health and Safety Executive, local councils and all the enforcement bodies, to ensure that it is put in place appropriately.

I have been impressed by the number of employers who are actually ahead in planning for a new work environment. They have spent a lot of money, time and resource on looking at how they can change their working practices, whether that is staggering shifts or whether it is making sure that there are physical barriers between people or that people take their breaks at different times. All of that is very important as we give people confidence to go back to work and make sure that they have a livelihood at the end

of this. We know that, whilst this is a public health crisis, if you are in poverty and do not have a job, that has health implications as well. Therefore, there is a need to make sure that we continue to try to recover the economy, and then to renew it as well.

Mr Allister: As I see it, the devolved regions were all very happy to be in lockstep with Westminster when it came to receiving and spending the Treasury's generous support. Now that we have moved, hopefully, to easing out of lockdown, there seems to be a preference for difference. I suggest to the First Minister that this should not be about the virility of devolution, nor about who has the best slogan. However, it could ultimately be about who has an economy left. I would like to hear from the First Minister a sense of urgency as to the resuscitation of our economy, because the stagnation of the status quo is going to do untold damage. It is very good to have a satnav that gives us the direction of travel, but if a satnav keeps saying, "Do not start the engine", it is not really advancing us, is it?

Mrs Foster: I welcome the fact that the Member recognises that this is a satnav. It has been described as a tunnel, and now it has been described as a satnav; I am quite happy to take both of those descriptions. I absolutely agree with the Member that we have benefited greatly from our membership of the United Kingdom in the economic packages that have been shared with us, and, of course, our National Health Service is part of our kingdom as well. However, what is important is that we have a localised response. Do you know what? The Prime Minister recognises that. He does so through the new joint biosecurity centre. The fact is that we might have to have localised responses to this virus, and he knows that that is the case.

I do agree with the Member that it is not so much about the slogan as the actions. The actions are set out in our paper. That is where we want to go to in relation to getting the economy back up and running again. I fundamentally believe that part of this is about public health and part of it is about getting our society back together again, but, of course, we need a good, strong economy to make sure that we have that in place for the well-being of our people in the future.

Mr Allister: Yes, but is the problem, particularly for Northern Ireland, not that, whereas you might have all these goals, you can only move to any of them at the pace of the slowest because of the veto-operating Executive that we have? Are we not in fact, in this part of the United Kingdom, more likely to be held back from doing things that we need to do for our economy and these other various steps because of the problems of operating mandatory coalition with a veto? The result is that you move at the pace of the slowest.

Mrs O'Neill: What we are doing is saving lives. That is the Executive's primary objective. We are working our way through this situation as best we can. The message remains to stay at home. That is what has actually helped us to keep our R rate down where it has been. At the outset of this, when the first person died here, the predictions were telling us that 14,000 people were going to lose their life. We worked our way through this to try to minimise the loss of life. On the one hand, we are very lucky, but, on the other hand, almost 500 people have lost their life. I have no other priority here, and I do not think anybody else here has any other priority, than to

save lives. That remains our guiding compass. We are not standing still; we have a way forward. We have actually set out a pathway through five stages of how we will move into recovery. It is our job to make sure that, whilst we minimise the loss of life, we try to build our way out of this on the other side. I am very happy that that is what the Executive are doing.

Mr Carroll: I welcome the fact that, unlike in England, the restrictions here have not been lifted, but, then again, just doing better than Boris Johnson is nothing to brag about.

A worker in a food production plant died in recent days, just weeks after workers at the company were forced to walk out en masse over health and safety concerns. Their colleagues, union reps, migrants' groups, radio broadcasters and more have been highlighting the lack of testing on those sites, never mind breaches of social distancing and PPE use. It is my view that we cannot consider lifting lockdown without first protecting workers in danger today, and there is a strong feeling that the Executive have not done enough to protect workers in that regard. If workers are forced back to work under unsafe conditions, my advice to them is to follow the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 2000 and:

"stop work and immediately proceed to a place of safety".

In the light of that, do the Ministers think that more could have been done to protect essential workers? Was it a mistake to allow non-essential businesses such as Bombardier to reopen?

Mrs O'Neill: Let me say this very clearly: I hope that you have taken the opportunity to report to the HSE the concerns that workers to whom you have spoken expressed about their workplace, as your job as an elected representative compels you to do.

No worker should be going to work in an unsafe situation. It is very clear that any workers who are concerned about their workplace need to raise their concerns with the HSE. They need to make sure that they flag them up. I absolutely support any worker walking out of the workplace if it is not safe. That is exactly how it should be. I acknowledge that good work has been done with the trade unions, with the Labour Relations Agency and with the businesses organisations to identify the sectors that could get back to work and could do so if it is safe. The criteria and the guidance were set out: every single employer must do the right thing by their staff; every single employer must adhere to the guidance; and every single worker must be protected if in work and not able to work from home. I send that message very clearly to all staff out there.

People are still afraid. I understand. From the very outset, people have been very anxious. You are anxious not just about yourself but about your family and about spreading the virus. You are anxious about bringing things home to your family. Those are all very reasonable feelings to have, but we must send a very clear message that we must protect the workforce. Employers have a duty to protect their workforce, and any employers that are not adhering to the proper guidance, social distancing and protecting their staff need to be called out.

Mr Carroll: I thank the deputy First Minister for her comments, especially where she said that she supports workers walking out if they feel that they are unsafe or

are working in unsafe conditions. Guidelines have been referred to already, but there are guidelines and then there is enforcement. They are two different things. I am concerned that step 1 will force more and more workers back into work without there being robust mechanisms in place to protect them.

I asked the Health Minister this question a few weeks ago but got neither a sufficient nor a direct answer. I will therefore ask the Ministers here today. More people are likely to go back into work very soon, so is now the time to increase the number of people employed to inspect workplaces, in order to ensure that the health and safety measures are not being breached?

Mrs Foster: As we have indicated in other answers, the health and safety piece is spread across a number of agencies. If those agencies are saying to their sponsoring Minister that they believe that they need more resource to go out and inspect, and not just to inspect but to educate, advise and inform employers as to how they can facilitate workers coming back safely, of course we will look at those bids, and the Department of Finance will look at them in a sympathetic way.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Executive for the road map for Northern Ireland, which will take time to assess. I thank the people of Northern Ireland for complying with Northern Ireland guidance and ask them, as the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have done, to continue to comply with the guidance to keep saving lives.

I ask the First Minister and the deputy First Minister sincerely, on behalf of the many parents who have contacted me, how it is right to require 10-year-old children to sit the transfer tests in November and December of this year, further to several months of remote learning and up to three further stages of blended school and remote learning, when the Executive can take action to change the use of the tests for post-primary transfer admissions?

Mrs Foster: The Member knows that parents still want to see academic selection. He may not agree with academic selection, but most parents in Northern Ireland still believe that it is the best way in which to decide where to send their child to school. That is the case, and we listen to those parents, so we believe that the transfer tests should be facilitated. If the Member has concerns, he should raise them not just with the Education Minister but, as I have said today, with the two bodies that are arranging the tests. I am sure that he will have an opportunity to do that at the Education Committee.

1.30 pm

Mr Lyttle: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I will do that on Wednesday of this week. The document also states that measures are in place to provide outreach services to children with special educational needs. Families across Northern Ireland are telling me that they are not. It would not be fair of me to ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the services to which the document refers, but I ask them sincerely to encourage the Education Minister to give an urgent oral statement to the Assembly to tell us what outreach services are in place for children with special educational needs.

Mrs O'Neill: On your first point around unregulated tests, it is not the Department of Education that sets those tests, it is the unregulated bodies. My position is very clear: I agree

with the Member that it is very unfair and that children should not be put in that position.

On the issue of special educational needs and the outreach services, we are happy to take that on board. The Education Minister will make a statement to the Assembly on Tuesday of next week, so perhaps that is something that we will flag up in advance. It is such a trying time for everybody, but for anyone who has a child with a disability, it is even more challenging. So, we want to make sure that every support is there. If there are examples of that not being the case, obviously we will want to raise them and make sure that they are rectified.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for coming to the House. By my count, they got through 60 questions between the two of them over the course of that session.

Mr Allister: How many answers?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has been here too long to be chuntering from a sedentary position.

Before we move to the Adjournment, I announce to the House that the Commission has agreed that the Building will be lit up blue tonight for International Nurses' Day, as a tribute to all our nurses.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Adjourned at 1.31 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 19 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): It is my duty report that the Speaker has notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with the Northern Ireland Act 1998, that a vacancy exists in the East Londonderry constituency, following the death of our friend and colleague, Mr John Dallat.

Committee Business

Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The first item of business on the Order Paper is a motion regarding Committee membership. As with other similar motions, it will be treated a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That Mr Matthew O'Toole be appointed as a member of the Public Accounts Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That Mr Matthew O'Toole be appointed as a member of the Public Accounts Committee.

Ministerial Statements

COVID-19: Department for Communities Response

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I have received notice from the Minister for Communities that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, I have relaxed the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question. Members do still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, preferably by notifying the Speaker's Office so that we do catch that there is an interest to ask a question, but they can also do so by rising in their place. I remind Members to be concise as they ask their question. There will be a period of one hour for questions to the Minister, and, if time permits, there may be an opportunity for a second question.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thanks very much, and thank you to all Members. If you see me looking at my phone, it is because my sister has been taken in at 10.30 to have her baby. I am waiting on news of the arrival.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to provide a further update to the Assembly on the work being taken forward across my Department and with multiple partner organisations to support and protect those most in need during this public health emergency. To begin with, I wish to place on record my sincere thanks and appreciation to all those who have gone the extra mile to help strangers, their families, their neighbours and their communities during the crisis. It has been truly humbling to witness the extraordinary efforts and selfless actions of so many, including my staff in the Department for Communities, our partner organisations, local councils, the voluntary and community sector, local sporting bodies, faith organisations, and the many, many community activists who have all played their part in protecting those most in need at this time.

In a statement to the COVID-19 Ad Hoc Committee on 9 April, I advised that one of my key priorities was to ensure that our services were reconfigured in a way that maintained delivery of our suite of social security supports for those most in need. Officials in the Department have faced a dual challenge to adapt quickly to social-distancing measures to protect our staff whilst responding to the unprecedented demand for our services.

During this period, I have widened the eligibility criteria for some of our support in order to provide further help and to

direct the support to people who find themselves in a crisis situation as a result of COVID-19. That has been possible only by the swift introduction of significant changes in how we operate, including removing some processes, such as suspending reviews and reassessments for health and disability benefits for three months and introducing necessary changes to the discretionary support scheme.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, on 16 March, there has been an increase of 294% in claims to universal credit and a 110% increase in claims to jobseeker's allowance (JSA). That equates to about 71,000 applicants for universal credit, with an average of 7,900 claims a week. Staff have been working extremely hard. According to data from 16 March to 14 May, we have made 140,294 payments on time, representing about 99.3% of all payments due by then. Members will be aware that the universal credit standard allowance has been increased for everyone by £86.67 a month. In addition, everyone making a new claim to universal credit can apply for a non-repayable universal credit contingency fund grant that is available through the discretionary support. This is publicised through nidirect, the main citizen-facing information portal, as well as through the Department's social media channels, and through a network of grassroots independent advice and community organisations.

A number of steps has been taken to improve our ability to respond to the increased demand for discretionary support. We have amended the regulations to widen the grant eligibility criteria in order to provide a grant for short-term living expenses to assist claimants who are affected by COVID-19. For applications, we have increased the income threshold to £20,405 and have changed the debt threshold from £1,000 to £1,500. That will ensure that more people on low incomes can access emergency financial support. An online living expenses grant application form is also now available on nidirect. Staff have been redeployed to this area to ensure that we can manage the increase in applications. The form can be completed and submitted online without the need to download or email.

From 16 March to 15 May, my Department delivered more than £2.3 million in discretionary support payments through 13,278 awards to people in need, including just over £1 million due to more than 6,863 new COVID-19 living expenses awards made to people directly impacted by coronavirus. That was one of the legislative changes that I introduced, with the approval of the Assembly, in April. I know that those payments have been a lifeline to many and have enabled them to provide for their families and to keep them safe, in line with Government guidelines.

We have also suspended face-to-face appointments across our jobs and benefits network, as well as medical assessments for personal independence payment (PIP) and employment and support allowance (ESA). Access to telephony channels will continue to be available for anyone who is claiming universal credit, PIP, ESA, JSA and discretionary support.

However, given the significant staff absences being experienced across all benefit operational areas, it is taking longer for some calls to be answered. To help, new online application forms for ESA and JSA have been introduced and are available on nidirect. The forms can be downloaded, completed and emailed directly to the relevant benefit area for processing.

The minimum income floor in universal credit has also been suspended for the duration of the outbreak, meaning that every self-employed person can now access universal credit in full. It ensures that the self-employed are fully supported by the benefit and social security system so that they can follow the Government's guidelines on social distancing and self-isolation.

I will make further amendments to assist the self-employed by ensuring that the treatment of payments, made under the job retention scheme to fund payments to the self-employed person's employee, are applied appropriately and not taken into account in the self-employed person's universal credit award. In addition, any other loan or grant to meet the losses of their expenses of the claimant's business, in relation to the coronavirus outbreak, is to be disregarded in the calculations of the person's capital.

Changes have also been made to ensure that if a person loses entitlement to universal credit on account of their income, the Department will treat the person as reclaiming universal credit for up to five assessment periods, rather than closing their claim, meaning that a person does not need to make a new claim if earnings reduce.

As well as delivering on our priority to get money into families and households to alleviate hardship, I have taken the decision to suspend, for a period of three months, the recovery of benefit overpayments and loan repayments from a number of social security benefits. The measure will provide some financial easement to people with benefit overpayment-related debt or an outstanding loan balance. The change will mean that many people will see an increase in the amount of money that they receive in benefits during these three months.

Recovery of all social fund and discretionary support loans will be suspended and customers who are currently making repayments through a bank standing order may wish to contact their bank to cancel their arrangement. However, that will need to be set up again following this pause period. For people who are repaying through other means, the Department has already written to employers asking them to the stop deductions from salaries, and all recoveries by direct debit will also be suspended for three months. I remain committed to doing everything that I can to ensure that those most in need, and the most vulnerable, receive the maximum amount of financial assistance and support during this difficult time.

We have also progressed a range of other interventions to ensure that support is made available to all those who are in need. One of the Department's early interventions, in partnership with Advice NI, was the establishment of the freephone COVID-19 community helpline. The service is available seven days a week from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm to ensure that the most vulnerable and those at risk of COVID-19 have access to practical support services and emotional support at this most difficult time.

Working collaboratively across Departments, health and social care trusts, local councils, community and voluntary organisations and the private sector, we put in place a programme to distribute food to vulnerable people across communities, and also to those who are self-isolating. My Department is investing £10 million in the service over the next three months, and over 70,000 food boxes have been delivered to those who need them. The food parcel service has been hugely successful in getting immediate

food and essential supplies to those in need. The vital service will ensure that those most in need in our society, who do not have a support network or family and friends to help them through the emergency, will have access to basic food supplies. It will also allow those who are at risk of social isolation to see a friendly face and to know that we, as a society, have not forgotten about them. There is a tremendous amount of goodwill and generosity in the action across our society, which is very welcome at this challenging time.

The access to food offer of support is broader than online shopping slots and food parcels for those in most critical need. Council coordinated volunteers can also assist with shopping for those who need it.

Hundreds of community organisations have availed themselves of funding to assist with food support to vulnerable people. Over 200 Spar, Eurospar and Vivo stores, as well as a large variety of independent retailers at local community level, are now also offering home delivery services to help those who are unable to get their own groceries. If anyone is in need of food or other advice or support, they should contact the COVID-19 community helpline in the first instance.

10.45 am

My Department has also been working with the Department of Health, the Health and Social Care Board and the four major supermarket retailers to put in place a registration process for those who have been advised by their GPs to shield for 12 weeks and who may need to avail themselves of priority online shopping delivery slots. That is a welcome development, and I hope that it will address the very real concerns and frustrations expressed by people in getting access to regular food supplies.

One of the other priorities is to ensure the safe delivery of medication to vulnerable people and those who are isolating and cannot arrange for anyone to collect their prescriptions. We have been working closely with the Health and Social Care Board and other health partners to ensure that the necessary arrangements are put in place to allow that to happen.

My Department has taken the lead in responding to the challenges that community and voluntary sector organisations face by introducing a range of flexibilities in terms and conditions around grant funding, including upfront payment and reduced bureaucracy. To enable that to happen, my Department has prepared the necessary contracts for funding and paid out over £9.5 million in grant payments to over 300 organisations since 1 April.

I have also ensured the protection of the management and delivery of three programmes under the People and Place strategy. The strategy supports over 300 projects across 62 geographical areas of deprivation. Those important community projects have now received six months' advance funding, totalling £7.6 million, to enable them to continue delivering vital services to those most vulnerable in our communities.

In addition, we have introduced the COVID-19 community support fund, releasing £1.5 million initially through local government's existing community support programme. The funding has enabled our local councils to directly support grassroots organisations in tackling poverty and helping

those in greatest need, and I hope to make a further announcement on the next step of that funding soon.

Following the recent announcement regarding financial support for charities and the allocation of £15.5 million in the Barnett consequential to support charities here, I have been developing plans to launch an Executive scheme to support charities impacted by COVID-19. Many local charities are at the front line in responding to the emergency and in supporting our most vulnerable citizens both now and as we plan the recovery phase.

I recognise the impact that the COVID-19 emergency has had on traditional fundraising activities and that this is a worrying time for many charities. The charities sector is made up of a diverse group doing fantastic work in our local communities. Given that this is a limited fund and it will not reach everything, it is important that any scheme to support charities is carefully considered and ensures that the best possible use of our resources is available to support and prioritise the needs within the sector. I am having discussions with Executive colleagues and hope to be in a position to make an announcement on that programme later this week.

I am conscious that other sectors are facing significant challenges at this time. I have announced a new £1 million COVID-19 creative support fund, which will be a mechanism to support individual artists and institutions in finding innovative ways to combat social isolation and address well-being challenges. The arts sector has such an important role to play in keeping spirits high but also, importantly, in promoting creativity in these difficult times and as we move into a recovery period.

I also recognise that sporting organisations at every level, from grassroots to those who compete at an international level, are facing serious financial challenges as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. I have worked with Sport NI and the Sports Forum to take immediate practical steps to support sporting organisations. That has involved an early release of the 2020-21 grant awards and the launch of a hardship fund for sport.

The £750,000 hardship fund, managed by Sport NI, has provided financial assistance through a grant of up to £2,000 to sports clubs and organisations to assist with essential overheads and the costs of maintaining their facilities during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

The level of demand for financial relief through the hardship fund for sport has been exceptional, with over 350 applications received since it opened on 14 April. I regret that, for now, the scheme has had to be suspended pending assessment of those applications that have already been submitted. The suspension of the scheme will continue to be kept under review, and I hope, subject to additional funding becoming available, to reopen the scheme in the future.

I am very conscious that the impact of this crisis on construction and on tourism has created very significant challenges for the heritage sector. My Department owns 190 state care monuments. Access to those is restricted in line with public health guidance, but I am pleased that we are able to keep them accessible to pedestrians.

It is important that other priority work in the Department is able to continue. I can advise that officials in the Public Record Office (PRONI) have been liaising with

the Executive Office, the Department of Justice and the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board to process requests from vulnerable victims and survivors who gave evidence to the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry. PRONI's work has been critical in allowing the Redress Board to begin compensating victims and survivors.

During this crisis, I have been very conscious of the need to provide assurance to households facing difficulties in paying their rent. Whilst we received initial commitments from the Housing Executive and all our housing associations to treat such cases with extreme sensitivity, I have followed that up with legislative cover to strengthen protection for private renters during the COVID-19 crisis.

The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill was approved by the Assembly on 28 April, and it ensures that landlords will now be required to give tenants a 12-week notice-to-quit period. That legislation will protect private renters by securing their accommodation, allowing them to protect their health and reducing the movement of people. It will also enable vulnerable people to shield, self-isolate and socially distance themselves.

A document providing housing-related advice to assist tenants and landlords to remain safe and secure, and comply with obligations while observing social-distancing guidelines, was published on 16 April 2020. A further update was provided on 6 May to reflect the extended notice-to-quit period contained in the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act 2020. The guidance is hosted on the DFC website, nidirect and linked to the websites of partner organisations, including the Housing Rights Service, councils and housing providers.

In my statement to the COVID-19 Ad Hoc Committee, I outlined the importance of protecting the homeless during this crisis. The Housing Executive has set up a dedicated team to manage its response to the crisis and has put in place a number of interventions to support homeless individuals or those threatened with homelessness. We will continue to take all possible measures to prevent vulnerable people from sleeping on our streets, and I commend all those who have worked with us to make sure that that has happened and to keep people safe.

I am extremely grateful to my Executive colleagues for yesterday prioritising a further £10 million in funding for the Supporting People programme. That money will maintain the delivery of housing support services across a wide spectrum of organisations doing vital work with older people, people with disabilities, those with mental health and well-being issues, those who find themselves homeless or threatened with homelessness, and vulnerable young people. The funds will be used to address the significant staff shortages in the immediate term and mounting pressure in this area if the number of COVID-19 cases in the Supporting People schemes continues to increase. This funding allocation represents our commitment to the vulnerable people in Supporting People schemes, and the staff providing support to them. We support them and we are working hard to ensure their safety and well-being.

I also want to recognise the important role being played by local councils in helping to support and protect people in need during this public health emergency. I am aware that councils are facing significant financial pressures, mainly due to the closure of their facilities and the resultant

loss of expected income. The losses sustained to date are of such magnitude that councils will soon be unable to meet their financial liabilities. I am therefore delighted that I received Executive approval to make an immediate intervention to avoid a cliff-edge financial crisis developing in local government. Yesterday, the Executive agreed to make available to my Department funding of £20.3 million to alleviate the financial pressures on councils. That intervention will provide relief to our councils, protect the delivery of vital front-line services during this crisis and ensure that councils are ready to play their role in our post-pandemic recovery plans.

I have also introduced legislation to relax some requirements for local government meetings, enabling them to hold meetings by remote means, including via telephone conferencing, video conferencing, live web chat and live streaming. Provision has also been made for remote access to council meetings by members of the public. In addition, information that generally has to be made available at council offices will now be made available on council websites. These measures will enable councils to continue the effective delivery of local services while being mindful of the health and safety of their members, officers and the public.

It is vital that we facilitate the continuation of council business whilst adhering to public health guidance and that we enable our councillors to continue to participate in democratic local government. Following discussions with the Department of Finance, I am pleased to confirm that councils are eligible to apply to the furloughed staff scheme through the job retention scheme. My priority has been to ensure that the rights of workers are respected and to protect jobs.

As Minister for Communities, I have endeavoured to put in place a range of highly responsive and targeted interventions to help and support families and those who make up the very fabric of our society, including charities, voluntary organisations, sporting bodies and the arts. Now that the Executive have published their road map for recovery, I will continue to monitor the adverse impacts of this pandemic on these target groups, and I will engage across government with our partners in the voluntary and community sector and the private sector to address issues as they arise.

We are all focused on moving out of the current crisis while, of course, ensuring that we protect people in the midst of this pandemic and looking at a phased approach to recovery. However, it is clear that we will be in a very different place as a society at the end of the process. I want to ensure that we retain the very best elements of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic by embracing a new sense of community spirit and togetherness, by acknowledging and recognising the efforts of key workers, and by protecting the most vulnerable and addressing the systemic inequalities that exist. I trust that you will find this update helpful, and, of course, I look forward to engaging with you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We now have a maximum one-hour period of questions to the Minister. I remind Members that this is not an opportunity for debate or long introductory comments. There might be an opportunity at the end, when everyone has asked a question, to afford Members a second question, if time

remains. Some latitude will be shown to the Chair or Deputy Chair of the Committee.

Ms Armstrong (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): Thank you, Minister. I will speak today as the Deputy Chair of the Communities Committee. Our Chair is not available, and we wish her well with a private matter.

Minister, I put on record our absolute appreciation for you and your Department. Anybody reading that statement will see the amount of work that has been going on in the Department. Everyone recognises the key health workers, but the hard work put in to help people on benefits, including those who are being introduced to benefits and have no idea how they work, has shown that, although not stress-free, the process can work quite smoothly. Today, we heard about a 90% increase in the number of people who have become unemployed during the pandemic. The fact that we are not having public outcries being reported every day in the media about the benefit system and access to benefits says a lot about your Department.

11.00 am

Just moving on to the detail of the statement today, I absolutely welcome your announcement that there will be some movement forward on the charity sector. That has been causing a lot of concern, given that the Department of the Economy has been announcing a number of business support grants, but the charity sector has been left out. I urge the Minister to do all that she can to ensure that that payment can go out quickly.

The Minister said that we would be in a different place as a society moving forward, and I am delighted to welcome the £20.3 million of council funding that has been announced today. We met as a Committee last week and heard from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), who outlined the financial difficulties that councils were having, so we are absolutely delighted that that is the amount of money that has come forward from the Executive to help councils that have lost out on income not generated through, for instance, leisure centres and so on. Can you confirm, Minister, whether that £20.3 million is to cover this period of three months or whether there will be more to come if there are further extensions to rates? Will the councils be asked to help prepare for this different society by working within the community to identify where personal protective equipment (PPE) and other protections should be in place for the community? I just want to find out if the £20.3 million for councils is just for these first three months and whether councils will be asked to use part of that money to advise businesses, charities and so on about PPE, going forward.

Ms Hargey: Those are two important areas. I will just start on the charity stuff. Obviously, we got the announcement of the Barnett consequentials a few weeks ago. The Finance Minister made the announcement about the hospices, so we have £15.5 million remaining. It has taken a bit of time to analyse the impact on our charity sector. We have a wide-ranging charity sector, some of which includes social enterprises. There is no legal definition of what a social enterprise is, but, obviously, a lot of them have charitable outputs, and they will be included. I will outline plans for what this will look like, and, obviously, my announcement will include the quickest delivery that we can get in terms of actually getting money out onto the ground. The important

thing is that we have over 9,000 registered charities that meet the legal definition in the North and £15.5 million will not meet all of the need. At this point, we have to analyse what the critical overheads are that we need to meet at this time as we deal with the pandemic. That is what I am assessing. However, I am, obviously, thankful that the funding was agreed by the Executive yesterday, and I will announce the roll-out of that this week.

On councils, the funding is initially to meet costs between now and the end of June, so it is for the immediate costs and impact of the pandemic at this point. Obviously, my Department has been working with SOLACE. It sits on the emergency leadership group at Executive level as well, and it feeds in on a daily basis. We know that there have been critical issues for councils. We have had information from councillors coming through from across all the parties, and, obviously, we needed to respond. We will work with them on the allocation in the next day or two, again to get the money released as quickly as possible. The Finance Minister will make a statement after this one, and that will include the issue for councils around waste management, which does not fall within my Department. There will be other announcements there too.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for her detailed statement and, as a member of the Communities Committee, welcome most of the content. One point that gives me considerable concern is the hardship fund for sport. As has been mentioned, the fund was closed within two days due to demand surpassing the funding allocated. In correspondence with my colleague Sammy Wilson MP, the Minister said that 40% of the funding awarded had been allocated to the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). That is grossly weighted, and I would like the Minister to outline what engagement she or her Department had with the relevant sporting organisations prior to the scheme's launch and, secondly, in the design of the scheme, what consultation her Department had giving consideration to equality impact across the sporting sectors in Northern Ireland. We know, as has been mentioned —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked his question.

Mr Buckley: — the severe —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked his question.

Ms Hargey: The first thing to say is that it was an emergency fund to respond to the crisis. It is not enough money to meet the need, and we do not have enough money to meet all the need that is out there. We did move quickly, however, working with Sport NI and the Sports Forum, which represents a variety of sporting organisations and codes, on the delivery of the fund, and I know that it has been welcomed by all of them, notwithstanding the fact that it is not enough money.

The scheme was launched. Everyone got the same information and was updated at the same time about the launch. The demand was unprecedented, so we had to suspend the scheme. It is not closed but suspended at this point, because we need to assess the applications that are in. From those applications, we will see what money can be made available and whether any money will be left over. I am working with officials, and we continue to engage with the Sports Forum and Sport NI on whether we can open the process again to allow other organisations to come in.

I take no role in the assessment of applications; that is done by trained staff who work in the sports branch. I did not have the breakdown figure right away. The detail is very much done by officials, adhering to rules on how public funds are issued.

I want to get as much resource and support as I can to all the sporting organisations. I have worked regularly over past weeks and months along with the two junior Ministers with Ulster Rugby, the Irish Football Association (IFA) and Ulster GAA to respond to the pandemic but also to look at what implications the pandemic has for sports. We have worked closely with the Sports Forum and Sport NI, which represent all sports at all levels. I want to continue to do all that I can to address needs, but that is with tight finances, when we are trying to deal with the immediacy of the pandemic by addressing homelessness issues and trying to make sure that people are safe. Those are some of the balances that we have to get right.

I continue to look at whether I can make greater flexibilities to increase the money available, allowing more sporting clubs to get the grant. I will continue to look at all avenues to ensure that I can do that.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for again coming to the Assembly to outline her interventions, which, to date, have been entirely citizen-focused and entirely based on ensuring the collective well-being of our communities.

It is absolutely right that the Minister has outlined her protections for councils.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can we come to a question, please?

Ms Ennis: Yes, I will. We need to ensure that our councils are adequately resourced. On that, can the Minister give us any more detail on how the money for councils will be divvied up? We need to ensure that there is a fair distribution across council districts, as some councils are impacted on more than others. Members of our Committee have mentioned certain reserves that councils may have. We need to ensure that there is an adequate and fair distribution of the money that the Minister has announced, so I wonder whether she can give us some more detail on that, please.

Ms Hargey: There has been a big investment by the Executive to provide the funding. We have been working with SOLACE and the councils to look at where there is need. It is not that an even calculation will be made across all the councils, because that is not how it works. Councils have different issues and difficulties that they have to deal with, so funding will be tailored to the needs of each of the councils. We will continue to work with them over the next few days, so I do not have a table that shows a breakdown of that finance just yet. We were dealing with furlough issues, which have more than halved the amount of finances requested by councils. We continue to work through some additional issues, with the goal of getting the money released and out as soon as possible. Once that has been done and the table has been agreed and signed off, I will make sure that Members and Committee members have that information.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement. I have been very complimentary of most aspects of her Department's response to the crisis. While I have been critical of some aspects, I do not for one second

underestimate the difficulty of addressing a wide range of issues as they emerge.

There has been reference this morning to the startling statistic that there has been a 90% increase in unemployment here, and the sad likelihood, if not reality, is that we will see more and, perhaps, even more dramatic increases in the number of people seeking that support. Is the Minister confident of the capacity in her Department to deal with further such increases, and does she have plans to increase capacity in that aspect of her Department's work and, indeed, in advice services?

Ms Hargey: That is an important issue and one that I discuss with Department officials on a weekly basis. At the outset of the pandemic, I wanted to ensure that payments were made to people as quickly as possible, particularly those who were in financial crisis. The unprecedented demand in universal credit claims is no secret, and I have spoken about it on a regular basis in the Chamber and outside it. The fact that we have had over 71,000 new claims shows the impact that the pandemic is having. Thousands of people all of a sudden — overnight — no longer have a job or have been let go on a temporary basis, and that could get worse depending on the outworking of the pandemic, if we get a second spike, and depending on the furlough scheme, which has been extended. That is to be welcomed. We do not know what this will look like further down the line.

There has been the additional pressure, which I have not shied away from, in that we are working with just over 30% of our staff. Part of that is due to people self-isolating, and the other part is to ensure that we adhere to social-distancing measures. I visited one of the offices in Strabane on Friday. It is an office of over 45 people, and they work on a rota basis over a three-week period and have around eight or nine people in the office at any one time. Obviously, that reduces the personnel that we have, but that is to ensure that our staff are safe. We have to do that, but I have to ensure that the service is not impacted by it.

I commend the work of staff, in that 99.3% of payments have been made on time, even in a period of an unprecedented increase in claims. That has been down to those critical front-line essential workers who have gone above and beyond in coming into work and working from home. We have had to change our practices and make more technology available for those who are working from home to ensure that payments can be processed. It has also been done through working on a shift basis and bringing people in throughout the day and over the weekend, if needed. We needed that during the initial spike in the pandemic.

I am confident, going forward, that we have the capacity. We are starting to plan to mitigate any eventuality that we may have in the future in responding to the virus. It has to be said that all that is being done because we have stood down some other procedures in the Department, such as suspending face-to-face engagement. If, as we move through the pandemic, there are easements and we start to open up our public buildings again, all of that will have to be assessed while keeping staff and members of the public protected. That has to be the number-one priority.

We are looking at unemployment benefits in terms of our employability programmes. We are starting to look at the recovery period and what we will need to do to respond to

those who find themselves in the social security system, including how we get people back into the workforce and what we can do to support them. I will meet officials over the coming weeks to start to plan that. That will have to sit with what the Department for the Economy does on recovery and, indeed, what the Executive as a whole do, but I am confident that our staff have been excellent throughout this whole period. They have been really committed to helping those most in need, and I am confident that we will be able to manage that in the time ahead.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, a recent survey by Chief Officers Third Sector (CO3) and the Institute of Fundraising — it surveyed 206 chief executives — highlighted that the majority of them have indicated that cash flow is a major problem, and 92% further highlighted that they were ineligible for other grants. The Minister indicated that the charity fund of £15.5 million that is allocated as Barnett consequential will be limited, so can she outline what additional support her Department is considering to supplement that fund?

11.15 am

Ms Hargey: It is a limited pot of funding, and there are pressures. I know that CO3 has been doing an analysis and has engaged over 200. We have more than 9,000 charities that are impacted, and they are impacted in different ways. We have charities in three brackets: those that have an income of less than £10,000; those between £10,000 and £1 million, and, from the analysis that we have done, we know that they will be most severely impacted by lost income and fundraising due to the pandemic. We want to make sure that the £15.5 million funding that we have from the Barnett consequentials gets to as many of those charities as possible. We want to make sure that this is not about meeting the longer-term costs of those charities; this is about meeting the critical short-term costs. That is why the proposal that I will bring forward this week will start to look at charities individually and their needs. We are also looking at other measures. Can they furlough their workers, for example? Are there other supports that can be brought in? I have written to the Minister for the Economy, and I know that she is looking at the £40 million grant that is available, to ensure that social enterprises and charities can also avail themselves of that. That said, you can avail yourself of only one funding stream from government; you cannot be double-funded. Many charities are government-funded. In my Department, any organisation that gets funding has been paid that up front. We have given advanced payments to them.

We will continue to look at this. We are meeting NICVA and others who have done surveys to look at the impact on the community and voluntary sector. Some of their initial analysis says that over £350 million would be needed for that sector going forward. I do not have that finance, obviously. We want to continue to work with the sector. We want to work with the grassroots organisations that have been responding to this public health emergency in defending essential services at this time to look at what additional supports we can bring in.

As was touched on in one of the other questions, society will change here. I think that questions need to be asked about what we finance and how we finance, as an Assembly and Executive going forward. That has to be around having an inclusive growth approach and looking

at issues such as community wealth-building to ensure that we can retain wealth and focus, wealth and growth within communities and to target people who need it the most. I hope that, in any economic recovery, we start to look at those measures in looking at issues of, I suppose, institutional inequality and what we can do to remove them. I will bring forward a proposal, soon, on developing the anti-poverty strategy and the child poverty strategy. There will be opportunities there to start to change how this institution and Assembly respond to those most in need. Again, I will welcome Members' input and engagement on those issues.

I will update Members. It is good that we will get the £15.5 million out. An announcement will be made this week to give an assurance to charities that the process is starting. The Economy Minister is looking at the £40 million scheme. There will be further discussions on support for the social economy sector, as well. It seems to fall between two stools because there is no definition of a social economy. We are looking at that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): So far, a further 14 Members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. I need your cooperation so that I will be able to afford the opportunity to as many as possible.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her statement and for the support that the Executive and Belfast City Council have given to the elderly and vulnerable in north Belfast.

Minister, sporting and recreational clubs are a key part of the fabric of our society. Many of them have missed out on the £10,000 and £25,000 grants that have come from the Department for the Economy. Many of them are unable to get any assistance from your Department. What further measures can you take? There are gaps for some of the clubs in the funding that they need to survive. They have low reserves; they do not have a regular income; many of them are staffed by volunteers. What more can you do — I implore you to do more — so that those clubs are there to assist our community when we move at the other side of this dreadful virus?

Ms Hargey: There are a couple of things. They do play a vital role in our communities. They will be key, even in the impact of the lockdown and the impact on children and young people who are missing their sports. Sporting organisations will play a vital role in the health and well-being of those people as we move into the next steps of our approach out of the coronavirus pandemic.

I am looking to see whether I can extend the existing hardship fund — the sports COVID fund that I launched. I have also written to the Minister for the Economy about the other grants. I believe that sports organisations should have been able to avail themselves of those funds where they have a business element. I was keen to do that and I am waiting to hear what the Minister has to say. I know that she is proactively looking at that at the moment. I am continuing to engage with the sports forum and Sport NI to look at what additional measures we can take. I also want to bring forward the development of our regional and subregional stadia programmes to ensure that we can get things moving on those key infrastructure pieces. We are looking at all of that at the moment and I will update Members as I start to bring forward more programmes and proposals.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her statement. I concur with Kellie Armstrong's remarks about the phenomenal work that the Minister and her staff have done so far. On the back of the last question, what she has done for self-employed people highlights the failures of the Economy Minister. Moving forward, what recovery plan do we have to help self-employed people and ensure that the Economy Minister picks up the responsibilities? Those matters should not fall to the Department for Communities; they should fall to the Department for the Economy. Those people should not be left behind.

Ms Hargey: The Executive are looking at a recovery plan and I know that the Economy Minister is going to bring forward an economic recovery plan. My role is to ensure, in any of that, that we have a different type of economic outlook that looks after the most vulnerable, that tries to lift as many up as possible and looks at a fair distribution of the wealth in our communities. There needs to be a focus on small-to-medium enterprises as the bedrock of our economy. There has been good collaboration across the Departments as well but it is not for me to answer questions for another Minister.

Mr Stalford: In her statement, the Minister mentions the fact that there has been a huge rise in unemployment. In a previous answer, she mentioned key infrastructure pieces. One of the most significant arm's-length bodies relating to her Department is, of course, the Housing Executive, which is working in conjunction with housing associations to deliver significant build projects. I am referring specifically to Hope Street in our constituency. Will the Minister give the House and me an assurance that no action by her Department will delay further the development of Hope Street and the associated development of additional housing in Sandy Row?

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for his question. We have been meeting and a lot of work over the last three months has been focused on the pandemic. There has been a slowing-down in other parts of the Department but we are focused on the issue of housing and new housing builds. That was a priority for me when I came into post as Minister in January. I have been in meetings over the last couple of weeks with the Department and there has been a change in personnel of one of our leads in housing and regeneration. Nevertheless, we are committed to developing the housing programme. It has been affected by the pandemic and construction has stopped, as have Land and Property Services (LPS), building control and planning. However, as we move through with councils up and running with planning, and as building control starts to get back to work, I am hopeful that we will move forward.

The big thing for me is to try to protect the capital budget and ensure that none of that is lost so that we meet our housing targets as we move forward. I will outline plans for my vision around housing and increasing the housing stock. I know about the issues in Sandy Row and I know that the community that I live in, in the Market, has engaged with community activists in Sandy Row. Going forward, the Hope Street development will be a vital one. In taking that forward, I am committed to addressing the connectivity needs of that community and to ensuring that they feel the benefit, and to ensuring that those physical, social and economic connections are felt in the city as a whole. I am committed to doing that, and I am happy to talk to you further after this session.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her statement. I am glad that she referred to the important role that the community sector has played throughout the pandemic. One of the schemes in which the community sector has played a huge role is the delivery of food parcels. They have been a lifeline for people in isolated rural areas. Has the Minister an opinion on the effectiveness of the food parcel schemes? What are the plans for the scheme for the future?

Ms Hargey: Access to food was one of the critical areas as we entered the pandemic. The scheme was an emergency response to ensure that we got essential food to people who needed it, be they people who were self-isolating and shielding, people who did not have a support network to bring them essential food or people in financial crisis who, perhaps, had lost their job, had reduced incomes or increased expenditure because they were at home. From the start, I said that I wanted to build in a review. The food programme cost £10 million for the initial 12 weeks, which covered the three-month shielding period. I built in a six-week review to the programme, and I am looking at that at the moment. We were responding to an emergency, and it is not a perfect programme — albeit, it is meeting need — so I wanted to review it halfway through to ensure that we could make necessary changes, if needed. We are making changes. We have, obviously, been liaising. Some 18,000 people across the North receive food parcels every week. Councils have had a role, as have DAERA personnel, and the Department for Infrastructure has had a role through its public transport being involved in getting the food parcels out to those who need them. We will review the programme and see whether there are other things that we can do.

We stopped at 18,000 people because the three wholesale suppliers that we use cannot go beyond 18,000. They cannot pack more food parcels than that because they have to adhere to social distancing, and that is the capacity and contract that was signed up to. We are looking at that to see whether there are other ways that it can be done, because I know that there are issues. An older person living on their own, for example, will not need some items in the food box every week, and we do not want food to be wasted. I want to ensure that people get the food that they need. We are liaising with councils. All 11 councils have a key food lead within their council, and there are daily calls with my Department to look at the issue. We are looking to see whether the products can be delivered to the council distribution points and councils can tailor the food boxes to the constituents and lists that they know to ensure that the people get the type of food that they want.

I also want to consider health and well-being and ensure that there is fresh fruit and vegetables in the boxes. A review of that is being done. I am meeting with officials this week, and we will communicate that with councils and the wider public.

As I said in my statement, as well as launching the food boxes and parcels, I released £1.5 million in a community COVID fund, which was disseminated through the 11 councils. I am looking at replenishing that fund, because I know that it is delivering critical need and services through the 11 councils. I will make an announcement on that in due course.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage Members to address the Chair so that the microphones can pick up what is being said.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, I put on record my appreciation to you for visiting Strabane, in my constituency, on Friday. It was greatly appreciated. You witnessed the great work that goes on by the local Strabane community project, the Fountain Street community project and the jobs and benefits office. Minister, I know that my colleague across the Chamber will probably not have had notice. I received notice of your meeting at 9.55 am — only five minutes before you arrived.

11.30 am

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to a question?

Mr McCrossan: I am just making a point, Mr Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I said, will the Member come to a question, please.

Mr McCrossan: It is important that we have prior notice, but I appreciate the Minister's visit.

The Minister has acknowledged and witnessed at first hand the great efforts that have been made in communities and the life-changing work that has gone on there, particularly through this pandemic. What other funding will be available to sustain this work beyond COVID-19? The Strabane Community Project, in particular, is a lifeline to so many people, particularly the elderly and vulnerable. It has faced some cuts, as you know Minister, in recent times.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member very much. I was delighted to visit Strabane. I will look at the issue of notice. Obviously, all Members should get appropriate notice when I, or any Minister, visits their constituency. I am glad that you, and representatives of other parties, were able to be there.

One of the first things that struck me is that St Pat's church hall is a real community hub. You can see the food operation and food boxes going out. There was obvious engagement and collaboration with the Fire and Rescue Service, which gave out essential fire and rescue information because a lot more people are at home. I commend their work.

I also visited the Grass Roots Cafe, which my Department supports as a social supermarket. Indeed, it is part of a pilot across the North that I want to expand. We are developing a business case for expanding the number of social supermarkets.

All of this, including the distribution of food parcels, is to address the immediate concerns in response to COVID-19. The public guidance from the Assembly asked people to stay at home, particularly those who had to self-isolate. We have a duty and responsibility to respond to that. We also have a responsibility to manage this, as we start to move through the different periods. That is why I built in a six-week review of the programme. We also need to look at this beyond 12 weeks, and consider what is going to happen after that. It will have to dovetail with the anti-poverty strategy. What this pandemic really exposes is the inequalities that existed beforehand. There are structural inequalities that we need to remove. The pandemic has also shown that, if the will is there, we can remove them,

notwithstanding the financial stuff, because we still rely on a block grant from Westminster rather than our own economic levers.

We need to look at all those issues and, when I was in Strabane, I gave a commitment to work with communities. I give the same commitment to any community that I visit. I want to give the power to communities so that they will be part of the decisions. All policies and strategies will be codesigned, and I will work with local organisations.

Strabane has a neighbourhood renewal partnership. Before the pandemic, I wanted to give assurance to neighbourhood renewal partnerships that are based in our most socially deprived communities as identified by the Noble index of deprivation. I have already given the commitment to extend their funding for two years, to allow time to design a new anti-poverty programme. I also gave them a commitment that that will be done in a codesigned fashion. It will not be done to them, but done with them — in partnership and working with them. We will look at this going forward.

I will outline other interventions that I am going to make. It will be a broader conversation on how we allocate budgets and funding. It is important that we have our own financial levers so that we can make our own decisions in the Assembly. I encourage society and communities to stay involved in those conversations. I want to bring forward pilots to look at community wealth building that considers the wealth within a community or council area, and work with local government and others to support small-to-medium enterprises. Also, I hope to support communities to come up with projects, so I want to look at developing cooperatives and have a culture of cooperatives within our communities and economy.

As I start to move through those initiatives, working with the sector, I will keep the Assembly and Committee updated. I am always open to suggestions. I do not have all the answers. I am more than willing to work with Members.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her statement and commend her and her Department on its ongoing work. Reports suggest that measures that have been taken to address homelessness during the pandemic have been effective. Can the Minister outline what steps were taken to achieve that? More importantly, what can be done to address that issue in the future?

Ms Hargey: It is a critical issue. As somebody who was a housing rights campaigner for many years in my community, I really wanted to look at that issue when I took on the role of Minister. Christopher touched on the impact in places like Sandy Row. With regard to homelessness, there was, obviously, an immediate health issue for those who sleep rough on the streets. That is not the only type of homelessness that exists in communities and society: thousands more people — up to 30,000 — are known as “sofa surfers”. They do not have a home to call their own. While it is important that there is a focus on street-based homelessness, it is important that we recognise that it is not the only type of homelessness out there.

Obviously, there was concern about the impact of the virus on street-based homeless people; that they would be more vulnerable to contracting the virus and to its spread, and the impact that that would have on the health and social care system. There was an immediate response to that and immediate interventions, such as upfront funding that

I released to the Supporting People programme in order to ensure that contracts and funding were paid in advance. I quickly engaged with the Housing Executive, which is my Department's arm's-length body that has responsibility for the issue. It set up a team immediately to look at that and to ensure that no one was rough sleeping. It is important that that also included people who had no recourse to public funds in the midst of the pandemic.

From that, we worked with the Health Department and the Health and Social Care Board. A nurse-led team was established to deal with people who have higher vulnerabilities and people who are homeless. That nurse-led team has worked really well. There has been that collaboration between housing and Health.

Today, there has been the announcement of an additional £10 million for the Supporting People programme. That will go to providers on the ground who work with people who find themselves on the street, people who are homeless in other forms, people with underlying addiction issues or mental health and well-being issues, and, particularly, young people, who are even more vulnerable being on the street or homeless. Excellent work has been done. Again, it goes back to the point that if the will is there to do those things, they can be done. The pandemic has shown that they can be done. I am committed to continuing that in the time ahead. I just want to end by thanking all those in the Department, the Housing Executive, Supporting People providers, and community activists on the ground who have worked on the issue over many years and who I will work with in the time ahead to ensure that we improve the quality of life of those people.

With regard to the broader issue of homelessness, more social housing needs to be built. There needs to be an increased programme and availability of the kind of housing that is needed going forward. That is one issue that I am looking at. I will outline my vision for going forward in the time ahead.

Mr Lyttle: Is a £2,000 grant, which is yet to be accessed by many sports organisations, actually enough for sports clubs to survive the COVID-19 crisis? Have the Northern Ireland Executive established a return-to-sport expert group to work with the Irish and UK Governments' return-to-sport groups to support sports clubs in Northern Ireland to return to practice?

Ms Hargey: There is never enough money for the need that is there. We released the £750,000 quickly. That is suspended at the moment, but I would like to get it started again as soon as possible if I can get the money made available to me.

We will not meet all needs. It is a bit like it is with the charities fund or any funding that comes forward: we have to look at the critical overheads and costs that need to be funded in order to keep organisations going through the midst of the pandemic. That is what we are trying to do. We are doing that assessment at the moment. It will not be to meet all of the costs and, indeed, there will be some organisations that will need it more than others depending on their output, make-up or their overheads. Therefore, we are looking at that at the moment.

As I said, I have written to the Economy Minister about the business support grants that are available to say that they should be available to sporting organisations that have a business element to them. We know that the furloughing

scheme has assisted many sports organisations and sporting codes to furlough their workers. In turn, they have been out on the streets on a daily basis responding to the pandemic. They have not just gone home and put their feet up — they have been working tirelessly responding to the pandemic.

My officials are engaging with officials in England, Scotland, Wales and, indeed, in the South about looking at a programme as we start to move into a period of opening up again and how we do that. Obviously, the North/South issue is going to be critical, because a lot of sports are played across the island on an all-Ireland basis. We need to make sure that there is synergy there, and we will continue to do that.

As we move through this, we will update the Executive. We are working with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Officer to look at easements, so that, if we are trying to get people back onto pitches and playing sports, it is done in the safest way. The main thing is that coronavirus is still here. People are still losing their lives. Any return to these activities has to be done in a managed way that ensures that public health and safety is number one. However, we will continue to liaise with them all in the time ahead. Indeed, as I have more announcements, I will make them in due course.

Mr O'Toole: As many others have said, the amount of work the Department for Communities has done to get money out the door to people who have lost their jobs, or otherwise been affected by COVID-19, is admirable.

COVID-19 is clearly a health crisis that disproportionately affects older people, but the employment and economic crisis disproportionately affects younger people. A report out today from the Resolution Foundation shows that up to a third of people in the UK who have been made redundant, lost their jobs or furloughed have been young people. We face a real possible long-term crisis for this generation who are entering —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to his question?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, I understand that Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is an important question. Is the Minister's Department doing serious work on the effect on a generation that could be lost to this crisis and who are entering the benefit system? We need her Department to be joined-up with the Department of the economy: is that happening?

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We do not normally have points of order during questions to the Minister. Perhaps, after this period of questions.

Ms Hargey: Thank you very much for your question. It is an important one. Of course there is an impact on older people and younger people, but also on poor people. We know that viruses like this, or any economic downturn, impacts most on poor people. When you look at issues of imposed austerity, again that impacts on poor people. We have seen studies, for example in Spain recently, that show that it is the most deprived communities that are being impacted by coronavirus death rates.

Obviously, I want to look at protections. That is why I said earlier that we need to have a new conversation about what our economic and social outlook will be in the future.

It is not good enough just to build an economy that grows and looks at those who are doing well. We have to look at those who are not doing well and who are deprived, and, where structural inequalities exist, we need to remove them. We need to have a serious conversation in the time ahead. If we do not remove those inequalities, then we are not dealing with them and we are forgetting about that 30% and moving on, so it is critical.

My Department is looking at this. We know the impact of the virus on health and well-being and on children and young people who are unable to see their friends or sports, and that is after a decade of cuts and austerity and the impact that has had. It has also come after decades of conflict and the impact that had on the mental health and well-being of our people. There are, therefore, layers of challenges that we need to work through and to remove. What this pandemic has shown is that some of the red tape and bureaucracy can be removed very quickly if the will is there to do it.

Notwithstanding that, there needs to be prudence, and we need to look at finance but, if the will is there to do things quickly, it can be done. I moved legislation a couple of weeks ago in two weeks. If the will is there to do it, it can be done. We need to have a bold vision of what our society will look like, going forward.

11.45 am

I will engage with the departments. I had met the Economy Minister even before the pandemic, because, obviously, there are clear linkages. We need to look at an economy that works for all the people and not just for a few. There are issues that I want to look at. I want to look at community wealth-building models, cooperative development models, and I have been working with organisations out in the community. I am looking to engage the Nevin Economic Research Institute and others in an economic rethink that protects the most vulnerable in our society. I will continue to do that. Again, any suggestions that people may have I am more than willing to listen to. Obviously, I will bring forward plans for an anti-poverty strategy, the children's poverty strategy, the gender equality strategy, the disability strategy and others, so all of those issues will feed in. That has to be cross-cutting across government; it will not work if it is only within my Department. All departments need to buy into that in a serious way. I will outline my plans for that and will work with those communities, with older people and with younger people. It will be a co-design approach so young people will be involved, along with the Children's Commissioner and others, in the time ahead. Older people will also be involved in co-designing that.

I totally get your point. It is a critical point that, sometimes, is missed when looking at economic recovery with regard to those who are more impacted than others. There is engagement at an official level in the two Departments on what the recovery will look like and how we deal with increased unemployment. We have to deal with the systemic inequalities and the structural inequalities that exist, and I am committed to doing that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister having answered the question from the Member, I invite Mr Allister to raise his point of order.

Mr Allister: Mr Deputy Speaker, several times during the statement and questions, you have upbraided Members for not being brief. Yet, surely, it is clear to anyone that the problem here is not the verbosity of the Members but the verbosity of the Minister, who has gone unchallenged for taking endless time — three and four minutes — to reply to questions. Can you apply a little parity of esteem on the issue, please?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has made his point. We are still just about on schedule so that everyone will be able to ask their question and get a full answer. Everyone needs to be careful with their time so that everyone will be afforded that opportunity. I will take another point of order.

Mr Buckley: In conjunction with what Mr Allister has said, I think that it would be appropriate for you to talk to the Speaker's Office about reviewing how the functions of this place work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there are many questions — potent questions — that Members would like to ask. They are being harangued by the Chair and told to speed up and are not having an opportunity to question the Minister. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we are given limited space and time in the House to ask questions. I ask that you review the mechanism to enable Members to ask questions of Ministers and gain responses.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Again, the Member has made his point, but I will highlight to him the Standing Orders on which I am asked to govern the statement and questions to the Minister. I am endeavouring to do my best to do so, and I believe that everyone will be afforded an opportunity to ask a question, if we are allowed to move on.

The Speaker's Office will certainly have taken note of this, and I ask the parties to reflect on how we are governed. We are governed by the Standing Orders. Everyone needs to carefully assess whether they wish to change that.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her statement today. The Minister mentioned that the PIP and ESA period had been suspended for medical assessments. Will she give us an update on that today and indicate whether there is any backlog or problem with that system?

Ms Hargey: I have made the decision to suspend for three months, and we have been moving to telephony. That does not suit everyone, and the important thing is that payments continue. This is in line with public health guidance on social distancing, isolating and staying at home and going out only when necessary. We will continue to review that as we approach the three months to see whether there is a need to extend it. We will do that in liaison with the Chief Medical Officer and the scientific officer.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, whilst I welcome the many positive announcements in your statement about supports, I am surprised that there is still no mention of cross-border workers, many of whom have fallen on very hard times as a consequence on COVID-19. You are the competent Minister, along with your colleague the Finance Minister, so can you tell me what supports you are bringing forward to help cross-border workers, given that you have already said in your letter to me that self-employed and PAYE cross-border workers should access unemployment support in the country where they reside?

Ms Hargey: Firstly, this is an issue that you need to take up with the Irish Government, and we have continually raised with them the payments that they have made —.

Mr McNulty: That is not what you said in your letter.

Ms Hargey: Let me finish, and do not interrupt.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, Members.

Ms Hargey: The other thing is that we have social security benefits that are open and accessible to people who need them. The issue has been raised with the Economy Minister, the Finance Minister and others to look at additional supports, but it has to be an engagement with the Irish Government as well.

There is social security that people can apply for, if they are based here. There are complex issues, and it is something that we need to look at, going forward. I am committed to trying to find a solution, but this does not rest just in my Department. There are issues with the Irish Government as well that we need to continue to raise. Indeed, if you have solutions or ideas, come and speak to me directly. I am more than willing to hear them, and my door is open.

Ms Bailey: I welcome the announcement from the Minister. It will provide some relief to many of our councils, because, as we know, they are not legally protected from insolvency. While this financial assistance may stave off bankruptcy for a few months, can I ask the Minister, who has told us today that she is able to legislate within weeks if the will is there to do so, whether her Department is taking legislative steps to avoid councils being forced to cut services or facing closure? Have any of those steps, either in planning or already announced, been determined with NILGA or, indeed, the councils themselves?

Ms Hargey: I continue to work with councils, and we have been engaging over the last couple of months and weeks. I intervened with a council that was going to let workers go and advised that it should explore all other options first before letting workers go at this time, because we need to retain our workforce as we move through the pandemic. I am glad that the furlough scheme was used. It was utilised in that council area to ensure that those 70-odd staff were not let go. I want to continue to work with councils in the time ahead on the financial pressures that they have, on future investments, on regeneration and, I suppose, on capital investments that can be made in their areas. If legislative changes are needed to do that — I am looking at all options at the moment; nothing is closed — it will be done in consultation with councils to look at their unique circumstances and their pressures. It is, obviously, a good announcement that we have managed to get the £20.5 million for the first couple of months, and we will start to move through the next phase of that in collaboration with councils, NILGA and SOLACE as we go forward.

Mr Allister: The scale of the distribution of Her Majesty's Treasury funds through the Minister's Department is impressive and generous, but it cannot go on for ever on that scale. The reminder today of a 90% increase in unemployment in April is a sobering thought. Yesterday, we supposedly moved to step 1 of the easement. On employment, step 1 says:

“Encouragement to those unable to work from home to return to workplace on phased basis subject to legal requirements and best practice”.

What encouragements have been issued on foot of step one that would ease the burden on her Department? Will she expand on what those encouragements are for people to get back into work?

Ms Hargey: I am glad that the Member got to ask his question. First, I make no apologies for implementing measures that protect the most vulnerable and those who need support at this time. I will continue to do that unapologetically in the time ahead and engage with citizens. The take-up of the schemes that have been implemented through my Department shows that people really need them at this point, and they will need them going forward.

In step one, we did not include dates; indeed, each step will have a different approach. The virus is very much still here, and people are very much still losing their lives. As we move through each of the steps, it is important that we have the most recent medical advice. It is important that the scientific advice and analysis is accurate; it is also important that we see the impact on the virus of any easements. It will take a week or two to know how the R number — the rate of transmission — is affected. We cannot jump in and do all of these things at once, because, if that sends the rate of transmission above 1, it puts increased pressure on our public health service. That would be the wrong thing to do, and many Members would rightly get up in the Chamber to condemn it.

Through the Economy Department, a forum has been established that works with trade unions, business representative bodies and employers. They provided guidance a few weeks ago on essential workers and others. The forum continues its business. It will be critical, because it is not a case of just opening the economy again and getting people back to work; it has to be done safely. There have to be measures in place to ensure that there is social distancing and that screens etc can be put up, if they are needed. There are also other issues with buildings. There might only be one toilet, so how do you clean it? How do you sure that clean surfaces are maintained? We know from the recent medical advice that indoors still carries the highest risk. We could not move this week to allow families to meet indoors because of the issue of shared surfaces and the transmission of the virus via those surfaces.

I will continue to be guided by the medical and scientific advice. I will continue to protect workers and the public with regard to accessing buildings, whether it is a local shop or a social security office, because people are still nervous. As I said, I was in Strabane on Friday, and staff are comfortable with the measures that are there at the moment, but, if there is any easement, they want assurance that their safety is still the priority. Notwithstanding the economic and social challenges that that poses, we have to step through this to ensure that we keep the R rate as flat as possible to ensure that our health system can cope. I will continue to work on this in the time ahead, but, again, I will be led by the medical advice and engagement with the trade unions and employers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): There are two further Members who have indicated that they wish to ask a

question. I ask for everyone's cooperation so that they are able to do so.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her statement and extend my good wishes to her sister.

I note the almost 300% rise in people accessing universal credit. People are spending more on electricity, gas and other utilities due to the fact that they are staying at home. That really brings into focus the fact that the welfare reform measures that were implemented by the House are not fit for purpose. There has been a lot of talk about a "new normal" at the end of the crisis: if that is the case, we cannot return to a situation where people who are in work or out of work are forced to go to food banks.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Carroll: To move to my question, I want to ask the Minister about private renters. Since her Department proposed the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill, scores of people have been issued with threatening letters from landlords to pay their rent. That disgraceful situation is happening. As we know, students, in particular, are living with families that are practising social distancing etc.

What is the Minister's view on this? What measures do the Executive intend to take to protect and support private renters who are being pursued by landlords who are trying to maximise profit at this time?

12.00 noon

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for your questions. I am more than willing to engage on social security; it is a critical issue that needs to be looked at. However, we do not have all the economic levers to make the decisions that we want to make. We are reliant on a block grant from Westminster. I think that, if we can get into a process of the transfer of those levers, we will be able to make all the decisions that we want to make and have the resources to do it. That said, I am looking at other resource options such as financial transactions capital and whether there other things that we could be doing in the time ahead.

On the issue of private renters, the Evictions Bill was brought in. It was done very quickly and there were reasons for that. I have seen correspondence from landlords who have blatantly stepped outside the guidance that my Department has given. I encourage anyone who knows about that to contact my Department or Housing Rights, which my Department funds. It provides an excellent service for those in the private rented sector, and I encourage people to go and get legal advice from it. I will be meeting our housing division tomorrow. One of the issues that I want to look at is what further interventions I, as a Minister, can make in respect of unscrupulous landlords who are using the pandemic in a way that, to be honest with you, is disgraceful. If I can take forward further protections or measures in the time ahead, I am more than willing to do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes the one-hour period for questions to the Minister.

Ms Sugden: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am quite disappointed that I, as the only Member left to ask a question, was not able to get in within that hour. You gave the Minister discretion in being able to finish her answer

past the hour, so it is disappointing that you would not allow me the opportunity to ask a question in less than two minutes. It is also disappointing given that many Members in the House can be represented by colleagues in asking their questions, but I, as the only independent Member, do not have that luxury. I would appreciate the Speaker's discretion to try to enable Back-Bench Members, who are not members of the governing parties, to ask questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has put her view on the record. It is something that we will all have to reflect on. I did endeavor to get everyone in. Unfortunately, I missed it by one on this occasion. I will reflect on how I manage business in future.

Mr Stalford: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. To come to the aid of a fellow Deputy Speaker, this is a plenary sitting of the House; it is not the Ad Hoc Committee on COVID-19. The time period for questions to a Minister is established in Standing Orders: it shall not exceed one hour. The Ad Hoc Committee on COVID-19 has a greater flexibility, and that is why you have more scope to play about with it in that area.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): You, too, have put your view on the record. Thank you for expanding on my reasoning.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In an effort to be helpful to the House — *[Laughter.]* Ms Sugden makes a very valid point. In your discretion, you could call her at a very early stage after the next Minister makes his statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has put his view on the record for everyone to consider.

I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while the Minister of Finance takes his place.

COVID-19: Update on the Financial Position

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, please take your seats again. We have also received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I am happy to take the first question from Ms Sugden, if the discretion of the Chair allows it.

I wish to provide an update on the Executive's financial response to the coronavirus crisis. On 9 April, I advised that the Executive had received Barnett consequential of some £1 billion, and we agreed allocations to Departments of £733 million. In addition, the following funding was held centrally: £150 million for personal protective equipment (PPE), £40 million for business support and £10 million for vulnerable people. A further £101 million was set aside for consideration at a later date. Since then, the Executive have received additional Barnett consequential of £213 million, bringing the total to some £1.2 billion. The Executive have also agreed that £30 million of resource DEL that has been freed up by the reinstatement of confidence-and-supply funding will be used for COVID-19 response. This response is continuously evolving, and the Executive have been reacting at speed.

Further allocations were set out in the 2020-21 Budget document that was laid before the Assembly on 30 April. Those included setting aside some £95 million for support to the transport sector, £22 million for support for charities and £49 million for support for NHS workforce costs. The hardship fund for microbusinesses has used the £40 million held centrally for business support. Using funding from the £22 million that was set aside for charities, £6.75 million of support has gone to hospices, and £15.5 million has been allocated to the Department for Communities for a scheme targeted at charities.

Using the £95 million set aside for transport, a support package has been agreed in conjunction with Treasury and the Department for Transport in London to help airports and ferry operators maintain connectivity and key supply routes. The Executive's contribution is currently estimated at £3.3 million and £2.2 million respectively. The Department for Infrastructure has been allocated £30 million towards funding pressures relating to loss of income, in particular those faced by Translink. That builds on an extra £20 million that was allocated to Translink in the 2020-21 Budget. There remains some £59.5 million available for transport, which will be allocated at a future date.

The £10 million held centrally for support for vulnerable people has been allocated to the Department for Communities for the Supporting People programme. The total estimated cost of this support is some £14 million, and the Communities Minister is to be commended for the measures that she has taken to fund almost £4 million of this. This is an important programme that supports approximately 19,000 vulnerable individuals living independently.

Of the £150 million held for PPE, £61.3 million has been allocated to the Department of Health and £4.9 million to the Department of Justice to ensure that our front-line staff have the equipment that they need. There remains almost £84 million for future requirements. The £49 million consequential received in respect of NHS workforce costs has been allocated to the Department of Health in full.

A number of additional allocations were agreed by the Executive yesterday. These include £25 million to support farmers and the horticulture industry. Further detail on that scheme will be announced by the Minister of Agriculture in due course. A further £3.8 million has been provided to DAERA for waste management, treatment and disposal. I am also pleased that we have been able to provide £20.3 million to the Department for Communities to support local councils, which have delivered vital services during the COVID-19 crisis.

Members may also be aware of the difficult situation facing substitute teachers who are unable to be furloughed and face considerable loss of income. The Minister of Education and I wrote to the Treasury asking for substitute teachers here to be furloughed, as happened with our counterparts in England. That request was rejected, so the Executive have stepped up, and, to his credit, the Minister of Education has found £8 million from his own budget, and I am pleased to provide an additional £4 million, bringing the total fund for substitute teachers to £12 million. The Executive also agreed to provide £1.4 million to the Department for the Economy to support students who are facing hardship. It is hoped that the Department for the Economy will be able to consider topping that up from its own budget.

We are very grateful for the exceptional dedication shown by health workers during the pandemic, and that is why the deputy First Minister gave a commitment that health staff would not suffer a financial loss as a result of the strike action that they took earlier this year. I am pleased to make £1.6 million available to the Department of Health to honour that commitment.

Taking all of that into account, the Executive have £119.9 million available for allocation. It has been agreed that that sum will be used to extend the support currently provided to businesses through the business rates system. In March, I announced a £99 million scheme involving a three-month rates holiday for all businesses. Had we adopted the English model, 60% of business premises would be paying rates today. I said at the time that that time would be used to develop a new scheme to be targeted at the hardest-hit business sectors. Ulster University's economic policy centre was commissioned to assist my Department in developing that scheme. I would like to thank Gareth Hetherington, who produced such a helpful report in a very short space of time.

With the Executive only now emerging from lockdown, the economy is still in the early stage of recovery. Business and trade unions are still in the process of ensuring that the economy can operate in a way that is safe for workers and the general public. I have therefore decided to extend the rates holiday for all businesses for another month, until 31 July. The rates holiday will then move into its targeted phase, supporting sectors hardest hit by the pandemic for the rest of the financial year. That includes the hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors. All pubs, hotels, eating-out venues, guesthouses, campsites, sports facilities, tourist venues, cinemas and entertainment venues will pay no rates this financial year. Retail businesses, small local shops, large department stores, high-street and out-of-town retail will pay no rates this financial year. The exceptions are medium to large food stores and off-licences, which have continued to trade, albeit with higher costs. Those food retailers have really stepped up during

this period by opening their stores and making adjustments to ensure safety for customers and staff. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude. I also want to thank the workers in those food stores for continuing to provide a vital service during this difficult time.

The availability of childcare providers is severely impacted by the difficulty in maintaining social distancing. Therefore, they too will receive 100% rate relief until 31 March 2021. Our airports will continue to be adversely impacted for a considerable time to come, and it is vital that they be maintained through the crisis and can function after the pandemic passes. That is why Belfast City, Belfast International and the City of Derry airports will also receive 100% rate relief until 31 March 2021.

Together, that represents a £213 million rate support package for business. It brings the total support for businesses from rate relief and grants to more than £700 million, demonstrating the Executive's determination to protect livelihoods and jobs.

The cost for business rate support exceeds the funding currently available. There is a number of potential sources of additional funding, and I am confident that that overcommitment will be met. However, we can no longer wait; businesses need certainty now. For that reason, I am today announcing the rate relief for the rest of the financial year. I would like to thank my staff across the Department who have worked so hard on a number of fronts, including developing the support package. I appreciate that I have presented a lot of information for Assembly colleagues to consider. To assist with that, I have attached a table to the written version of this statement that summarises the agreed allocations. I trust that Members will find it to be helpful.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I now invite Members to ask concise questions to the Minister for a period of one hour. Some additional latitude will be given to the Chair of the Finance Committee.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the discussion that we had earlier today.

Speaking as Chair of the Finance Committee, I welcome the allocation of £1.2 billion over the past six weeks from our Government. It is great to see the real benefits of being part of our United Kingdom. I particularly thank the Department and the Minister for listening to the concerns of our Northern Ireland businesses, for the continued rate relief, and for its extension to key sectors, such as our vital hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors until the end of the financial year.

We also welcome the extension of rate relief to our airports until March 2021. I also note the £60 million that is available centrally for further support to our transport sector. It may indeed be needed to restore and maintain vital air and sea routes. Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am coming to my questions.

As we have already heard, additional support for our councils is also very welcome. However, as the year progresses, our councils will face additional increasing pressures. In particular, will the Minister commit, with other Departments, to provide clarity to all the businesses that are affected by the changes in rate relief, indicating clearly those that will benefit and those that will not?

Minister, if you have the opportunity, will you also comment on whether local newspapers are likely to get some additional support?

12.15 pm

Finally, speaking as our party's finance spokesperson, we welcome the support for businesses, for the vulnerable and the continued support to our vital NHS and our transport sector. There is clearly a willingness to recognise that the crisis that we are in, but, last week, we heard from the First Minister that we would see an economic recovery plan —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member ask his question?

Dr Aiken: — and we have not seen that yet. Our party has asked repeatedly for a COVID-19 recovery plan to be the main Programme for Government focus. When are we likely to see a recovery plan that meets all those needs for the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Chairperson for his comments. Of course, there is such an enormous variety of businesses, and we are making a distinction in retail between the medium-to-large food sector and other retail. There is clarity for all businesses in that we are including all businesses up to 31 July, but I will ask the Department to be more definitive on which businesses are included beyond that date to the end of the financial year and which are not. It is impossible to go into the huge variety of businesses that we have here, and that includes newspapers. I know that local newspapers have been lobbying us all about the precarious position that they find themselves in, and I will make some enquiries in the Department on whether they become part of that ongoing package beyond 31 July. Of course, if they are paying rates, they are included and they will effectively have had a four-month holiday up to that point.

On the recovery plan, it is the responsibility of the Department for the Economy, and the Economy Minister has signalled to the Executive that she is moving towards being in a position to share some thoughts and some material with the Executive on a recovery plan. The study that we commissioned with Ulster University on the impact on businesses is available on the Department's website. I have recommended that study to Executive colleagues as well, because I think that that will inform any recovery plan that the Executive will develop.

Mr Frew: I welcome the decision today. I have been calling for it for so long and I think that it is a no-brainer. It is the difference between businesses existing and not existing. One business in my constituency is due to make a loss of £200,000; its rate burden is £170,000, so this is the difference between existing and not.

The Minister has been pretty good at spending Barnett consequential money. The cost of the business rate support exceeds the funding that is available. Will the Minister tell us by how much it exceeds the funding and what work is being conducted to see what needs to be changed, or stopped, with regards to normal Budget functions. Households have made sacrifices on a daily basis, so when will they see the Executive make difficult decisions and make sacrifices themselves?

Mr Murphy: The Executive are making difficult decisions. The decision to overcommit is a difficult decision, but nonetheless, it is a vital decision to support businesses. People seem to think that the only difficult decisions that the Executive face are whether to charge households for additional services, and that if you do not make those decisions, somehow you are not stepping-up to the mark. Difficult decisions are to try to provide support to vulnerable people and communities at this time and to overcommit in relation to that. I am confident that the level of overcommitment is manageable. It is significant for the Executive and it is less than £100 million, but the business grants, which are due to close tomorrow, are forecast to cost less than the original estimate. That will go a considerable way to addressing that shortfall.

We have also commissioned a reprioritisation exercise across all Departments and that will allow the Executive to target money where it is needed most. It will be a combination of some of the money that we allocated to Departments that is unlikely to be spent. Departments have additional costs in responding to COVID-19, but there are other areas in which they will not spend money. We need to ensure that the Executive's priorities — supporting business and ensuring that business gets through the pandemic and out the other side is a significant priority — are met by the collective effort of all the Executive's Ministers.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his statement, which will be very welcome across many sectors. In particular, the childcare sector, which is struggling very much at this time, will greatly welcome the rate holiday. Sub teachers will also be very relieved today. They have waited for a long time, with bills piling up. I, therefore, welcome the Minister's intervention to provide funds to ensure that those teachers will receive financial assistance. Does he have any idea when those teachers are likely to receive the payments?

Mr Murphy: I am very much aware of the hardship that sub teachers were facing. The Education Minister and I wrote jointly to the Treasury on 29 April to request access to the coronavirus job retention scheme. The Member will probably know that sub teachers in England are provided, in the main, through agencies, which meant that they were able to access the furloughing scheme through the coronavirus job retention scheme. Sub teachers here operate on a more ad hoc basis. They are basically on a list and are contacted in a less structured way and are not part of agencies. As a consequence, they were unable to access that scheme. So we pressed Treasury for a number of weeks to try and get some degree of support for sub teachers. The Education Minister and I have been pushing that case with Treasury. We only really got final word in the latter part of last week that Treasury was refusing to support our sub teachers in that fashion. That presented an inequality in how sub teachers were dealt with in Britain.

Nonetheless, we decided that if that effort was not successful, we would attempt to fund the scheme that the Department of Education had identified through our own resources. In fairness, the Department of Education came up with £8 million of that from its budget, and the Executive agreed on my proposition to add a further £4 million to that budget. That means that there is £12 million to support sub teachers until the end of June. The speed with which that money can be allocated is now a matter for the

Department of Education because, as I said, it is a mixture of the funding that it has provided and the funding that we have provided. The scheme has been approved by the Executive, so it will be up to the Department of Education to get that out to the sub teachers as quickly as it can.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome all the allocations that have been made today, particularly money that has gone to Translink. I am sure that my colleague to my right will welcome the announcement on substitute teachers. In relation to the overcommitment made on business rates, while business rates are completely critical, the reason why they are critical is that they are the only politically acceptable revenue-raising tool that the Executive have. Will the Minister agree with me that we need a proper, joined-up, fiscal and economic response to this crisis? We need it from his Department and the Department for the Economy. It needs to be joined up and it needs to avoid hare-brained schemes like the one that is seeing his Department return £2 million this year thanks to a decision made by Sammy Wilson nearly a decade ago to subsidise —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can we have a question?

Mr O'Toole: — non-existent flights to North America. Will he come up with a joined-up fiscal and economic response to this crisis?

Mr Murphy: I am happy to do that and will make every effort to do that. A joined-up response is the responsibility of the Executive as a whole, although I have a responsibility for making propositions. I know that he has raised the issue of air passenger duty (APD). That money is removed from the block grant. It is not something that we pay out. That is there to ensure that, if it is possible — every effort will be made to attract long-haul flights back — it is an incentive to offer for long-haul flights. If it is not there, there is no incentive to offer them. Previous Executives concluded that it was worth maintaining that particular arrangement in the hope that long-haul flights could be returned.

There is much greater traffic through Dublin now for most people on the island. The Executive could decide to change their approach to that or, perhaps, the Department for Infrastructure could have an influence there, but that was the purpose for which APD was held. In overall Executive spend, it is not the biggest amount of money, although, by anybody's reckoning, over £2 million is significant.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is vital that this place and the Executive do all that they can to support people and businesses to get through the current crisis and the impending recession. The rates actions are to be welcomed. Obviously, there are concerns about the overcommitment around that, and I think that further reassurances will need to be given on how we will manage that.

My question touches on some of the other issues that have been raised. There is a need not just for rates actions but for that to be coupled with actions by the Department for the Economy to support businesses to get through this. Does the Minister have any idea of the scale of the financial commitment that will be required? Will we be able to assist businesses through further grant schemes to get through this because rates actions will not be the only

thing that will be required to assist businesses to survive a recession?

Mr Murphy: Today's announcement, coupled with the grants scheme of, I think, over £300 million from the Department for the Economy, and the £40 million that we set aside for business hardship schemes, all come to in excess of £700 million worth of support that the Executive have provided for business. It is a significant injection in trying to keep our businesses. At the same time, the primary responsibility of the Executive is to keep the public safe and alive, so we have invested very heavily in the Health response to coronavirus. We have responded in three broad areas in our COVID spend: Health; supporting business; and supporting the most vulnerable in society. We have tried to spread the money across those areas to try and ensure that that would be effective.

Clearly, in relation to rates, the projection of the cost of that is based on the full intake of those rates. It is not money that we are spending; it is money that we are not collecting. I think that we can safely assume that not all businesses will be in a position to pay rates during the rest of this financial year. The estimate is based on all businesses continuing to pay rates. Clearly, businesses will struggle to come out of this, even those where restrictions are lifted, and that is why we targeted the support. Whilst we have given all businesses a four months' rates holiday, we targeted this support on those businesses that, on the analysis provided to us, have suffered and may well continue to suffer beyond the end of the financial year, particularly the hospitality sector. We are not going to see packed pubs, packed restaurants and filled hotels for some time to come, I would imagine. I do not doubt that those sectors will need continued support, but we can only do what we can with what we have at this time, and we also want to give businesses some certainty on what they are facing.

I think that the announcement today of a rates relief extension to the end of the financial year will be welcomed by those businesses, but we are absolutely certain, as he is, that this is not people being out of the woods yet, by any stretch, even with this support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): A further 13 Members wish to ask a question. I ask for everyone's cooperation so that they may ask their question and receive an answer.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the funding measures that he has put in place.

Going forward, like many Members, we are concerned about the recovery phase and ensuring that we can get our job creation and our economy back to where they were they were. What conversations have you had, Minister, with the Chancellor to discuss an economic stimulus package?

Mr Murphy: We are continuing to engage with the Treasury. Later today, along with the Finance Ministers from Scotland and Wales, I will have a conversation with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. As part of those conversations, we talk about some of the packages that the Treasury has offered to date, such as the job retention scheme and the self-employed scheme, and about some of the questions and anomalies that arise, including identification issues with the self-employed scheme. We have been pressing on that matter with HMRC, as well. We continue to raise issues with some of the schemes and some of the challenges that they present, but we

also discuss how we attempt to get the economy back on a stable footing on the other side of that. Nobody is underestimating the challenge that that is going to be for all of us. We will continue to discuss that, and I hope that there will be further support, but we have had no indications, as yet, of what that might amount to.

Mr McAleer: As Chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, and as a representative of a mainly rural constituency, I welcome the £25 million in the Minister's announcement for farmers and the horticulture industry. Does the Minister agree that that funding should be directed towards primary producers who are most in need, particularly those whose annual incomes are so low that they will not be able to gain any benefit from the self-employed income support scheme and the other schemes that have been announced?

Mr Murphy: I am very much aware, as a rural representative, of the impact that this has had on the farming community, with restricted access to markets and a drop in market price that could result in many in the industry going out of business as the market value drops below the production costs.

That is very much a feature across sectors. There are, of course, particular issues for those in the horticultural sector at this time of year, given that this is when they normally make most of their income. The £25 million that we have given to DAERA is to try to deal with that situation across sectors. We look forward to seeing the details of the announcement of the Minister's scheme. As Chair of the Committee, you and the Committee will, I am sure, analyse the scheme and interrogate officials and the Minister on how it will roll out. There is no doubt that the farming community is suffering, as are all businesses that have been unable to access the other support measures available. Hopefully, this money will go some way to address that, but I have no doubt that businesses will continue to struggle in the time ahead.

12.30 pm

Mr Buckley: I broadly welcome the statement, particularly the funding allocated to key businesses through the extension of rate relief. That is vital and an essential lifeline for those businesses. On the back of what has been said about farming, I am delighted that farmers, the backbone of our community, have received a financial package of £25 million, which is to be welcomed. Has there been any detailed discussion on whether a further financial package is needed for farmers at this time? Also, have any specific sectors been mentioned in conversation with the Minister of Agriculture?

Mr Murphy: There has not been a discussion on a further package. We will get this one on the ground first to see what impact it has. Coming from a farming background, I have no doubt that farmers will never say no to any further support that might be available to them.

There have been conversations about the horticultural and dairy sectors, but the Minister of Agriculture has, on a number of occasions, advised the Executive about the challenges facing all farming sectors and the need for support measures. He has been in touch with my Department and engaged on the type of scheme that he wants to be brought forward. We have provided the funding for it; he will, in the near future, I think, announce

the details of where he wants that to go and who is eligible to apply.

The defining factor in many of the measures that we have introduced as part of what we call “COVID spend” is to try to get people through the near to medium term. This is not about the long haul. We do not have the resources to act for businesses in the long term. The further extension is until the end of the financial year, and that is for only some businesses. For others, we have given out support in the form of £10,000 or £25,000 grants. All of that is to try to get people through the immediate phase. Similarly, this scheme for farmers is, I am sure, predicated on trying to get them through the immediate challenges that they face, in the hope that the economy and activity will pick up in the near term, when we will be able to determine what ongoing support is needed.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his statement. I very much welcome the £1.4 million towards the student hardship fund. He will know that I have been highlighting that issue for many weeks. I hope that the Economy Minister will top that up.

The rate relief extension will be very welcome news for businesses. Over £700million, including grants, has now been directed at supporting businesses. That is hugely important.

The criteria for the hardship fund were published at the weekend.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to her question?

Dr Archibald: There was an expectation that social enterprises and sole traders would be included. They are facing real financial difficulties and are despondent at not being included. Does the Minister agree that that should be addressed and that those businesses should also get support?

Mr Murphy: There is a real issue with social enterprises, some of which are charities and others are not. There has been some exchange between the Economy Department and the Department for Communities on where that responsibility lies. I would like clarity for those in the social enterprise sector on where they can access support. Not only are they legitimate and genuine businesses in their own right but they perform a very important social function of assisting people who might not otherwise gain employment or receive some of the services that they provide. They are a shining example of what can be done by not-for-profit businesses interacting with the community. I sincerely hope that the two Departments will reach a point of clarity on where this sector fits. We will continue to engage with those in the sector to try to make sure that they do not feel excluded from any of these packages.

Mr McCrossan: I welcome the Minister’s statement and thank him for bringing it to the House. Minister, there is much in the statement that will be welcomed by many. In particular, we have led a strong campaign on the plight of sub-teachers over the last eight or nine weeks. Uncertain whether they could pay bills or put food on the table, it has been a very stressful time. I am just wondering, Minister, what conversations you have had with the Minister of Education as to how the scheme will be rolled out. Were criteria discussed in reaching the overall figure of £12

million, and how quickly will it be allocated to these people who are suffering at this time?

Mr Murphy: I think we were all very much aware of the plight of sub teachers; I am sure there is not a Member here, myself included, who was not lobbied in relation to that. In the first instance, our responsibility is to try and ensure fairness in how they are treated. If sub teachers could be furloughed in England, then quite clearly the first approach — and I appreciate that the length of time it took us to get a proper response from Treasury added to the stress faced by sub teachers — was to seek an opportunity to get equality of treatment through the Treasury. Both the Education Minister and I pursued that. Once we were quite clear, at the end of last week, that that was not going to happen, we quickly moved to agree between us the amount of money that was required. The detail of that scheme — how it is worked out and how quickly it will be paid — is a matter for the Education Department and the Education Minister. I am pleased, as I am sure he is, that we have the funding available, and we want to ensure that there is no more uncertainty or stress for those who are in that category and that we quickly get the support to them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker — Mr Deputy Speaker, sorry. I elevated you there. I thank the Minister for his statement, and there is much to be grateful for — in particular, the sub teacher payments. However, there does seem to be an omission, Minister. You may be aware that it is Mental Health Awareness Week, and in ‘New Decade, New Approach’ there was a commitment by the Executive and the Assembly to deliver a mental health action plan by the end of April. Can the Minister detail any amounts of money that he has allocated to the Department of Health to action this, and, if not, can he make a commitment today? I think the money that is needed is in and around £2.5 million.

Mr Murphy: I would probably need to go back to the Budget statement to try and figure that out. This is COVID response money. Quite clearly, a lot of issues that the Executive had intended to be dealing with and set themselves time frames for dealing with, including mental health, the recommendations of the RHI inquiry and Brexit — remember that? — have been interrupted by the need to quickly respond to a very serious threat to life and society in the form of this pandemic, so some of that has gone on the back foot.

I realise that one of the consequences of dealing with the pandemic has probably been an increase in mental health stress. I will probably have to defer to your own colleague and my Executive colleague the Minister of Health to advise us. I know that there is a commitment across the Executive; that is why we agreed to have a cross-party team of Ministers to look at this. It was not just confined to the Department of Health. I do not know for certain about the allocation to it — it was not part of this series of allocations — but I am happy to get the Member some figures. Clearly, one of the big consequences of society’s experience of this pandemic will be an increase in stress and mental ill-health, and we want to make sure that we can meet that as best we can.

Mr Lyttle: Childcare and education will play a vital role in the new society that we must build further to COVID-19,

so I welcome the 100% rate relief for childcare providers up to March 2021 and, indeed, the long overdue payment for sub teachers announced today. Will the Minister tell us what explanation the UK Government gave for refusing the furlough of Northern Ireland's sub teachers, how much the sub teachers will receive and when they will receive it?

Mr Murphy: I appreciate that Treasury has a lot on its plate at the moment. The difference in approach is that they have been very reluctant to furlough public-sector workers unless there is a very clear demonstration of a loss of income to whatever sector they work in and they are not able to be redeployed in other areas. The sub teachers in England come through an agency, so in effect they have a private employer which was able to access furlough money on their behalf. Sub teachers here, as the Member will know, come on a much more ad hoc basis whereby schools essentially have lists of people that they can call up as and when required.

It is an Education Department scheme. My understanding of it is that it was intended to have a record of, I suppose, the average days — some people might only work once a week; others might be working three or four days a week — to make some sort of assessment based on the frequency of employment that they have over a period of time and to try to make an allocation based on what their likely income would have been, from March right through to June. That is my basic understanding of the scheme. I am sure that the Education Minister will be able to assist you with more detail.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister. This is a good statement, which will please many, including sub teachers, who have been fighting for it. The announcement of support for students facing hardship is important, as is the extension until the end of the financial year of the rates holiday for targeted businesses. The Minister listed a number of those targeted businesses, included guest houses and childcare providers. I ask the Minister to confirm whether those who operate from a property subject to domestic rates will be included. Will they be able to avail themselves of a domestic rates holiday? For example, a guest house tends to be its owner's home, so guest houses tend to pay the domestic rate, not the non-domestic rate. Will he extend the rates holiday to include all businesses? That is not quite clear from the Minister's statement.

Mr Murphy: If guest house owners were able to access the £10,000 or £25,000 scheme, they would have been considered commercial properties, or a commercial section of a residential property. If they were not able to, there would be a difficulty there, because they are not commercially rated and are therefore unable to avail themselves of a commercial rates holiday.

I know that there are business hardship funds. We have set aside £40 million for the Department for the Economy to provide business hardship funding for businesses that have not been able to avail themselves of any of the other relief or grants that have been available. I therefore advise people to find out quickly whether they do not qualify. I am told that the eligibility criteria was made available at the weekend, but I think that the scheme will formally open this week at some stage. It is for the Minister for the Economy and her Department to state when that is likely to happen. I think that people not paying commercial rates would find it difficult to access a commercial rate relief. I suggest

that those businesses consider looking to the business hardship fund, because that is for people who have missed out on the various other schemes.

Mr Boylan: Thank you, Minister, for the statement. I commend you on it.

I welcome the £30 million announcement for Translink, which is on top of the £20 million that was allocated to it in the recent Budget. As that money rolls out, I look forward to working with you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the rest of the Committee for Infrastructure on scrutinising it.

My question relates to furloughed workers. Can the Minister update us on how public bodies have utilised the furlough scheme, and has it been done in consultation with the unions?

Mr Murphy: My Department's responsibility is really to seek a clearer understanding with Treasury. Initially, as I said, it was very reluctant to furlough public-sector workers. Treasury set a number of criteria to be met, with one being this: if there was a loss of income to whatever organisation employed them from public bodies not being engaged in the work that they are meant to be engaged in and there was no ability to redeploy staff elsewhere. Public bodies were therefore set criteria to be met.

Our role and responsibility was to provide advice to the various Departments and say, "If you feel that there is a section of workers in your Department or arm's-length body that may be able to avail itself of furloughing, and you are losing money as a consequence of paying out salaries that you may be able to acquire from elsewhere, by all means investigate the opportunity and, if needs be, come back to us for advice". It is therefore up to the Departments themselves, and I know that some have done that. The Department for Communities has done so with museum staff. I know that councils, as, if you like, arm's-length bodies of the Department for Communities, have furloughed a number of workers, and that has saved on their wage bill and their ongoing loss of revenue. As I said, it is really a matter for Departments themselves to assess whether they have staff who fall into the category and then to undertake the necessary consultation with those staff and their union representatives.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his answers so far. It was good to see you out getting your daily exercise at the lake end at the weekend, Minister, socially distancing and keeping healthy.

Minister, I welcome the support for local authorities, many of which have seen a drop in income of up to £1 million a month. Local residents face a reduction in services and potentially face rates hikes. It is positive news that councils can now access the furlough scheme. Can the Minister update the House on plans to support local councils beyond what has been announced today? Will he be providing security for councils to ensure that no further jobs will be lost in local authorities as a consequence of COVID-19?

12.45 pm

Mr Murphy: I recognised the Member whizzing by as I was out exercising at the lake end, which will be unfamiliar to most of the rest of you. He had more hair at that stage, but I recognised him nonetheless [*Laughter.*] Yes, I am clear that I have conversations with councils. The Department

for Communities has responsibility for local government. They put a proposition and a package to us, and we managed to give £20 million to that. The Department for Communities will have to bring forward the details of that scheme, including how it is spread among the 11 councils and on what basis and what it intends to do. Councils are clearly in stress and have been losing a lot of revenue. The ability to furlough some of their staff, particularly leisure staff and staff like that, has been a big assistance and has taken a significant chunk off the monthly loss that the councils were experiencing. Nonetheless, they continue to lose money. Of course, like Departments, councils will not be spending on things that they would otherwise have spent on. For instance, they will now not be investing in community festivals that would have taken place over the summer because they will not happen, so they will be able to make some savings. The council area that we both live in has been engaging with the community side to see what projects will and will not go ahead, and it will then see if it can save some money.

It will be a very difficult balancing exercise for councils. They already have their rates set. The purpose of a lot of the COVID allocations is to try to get people through the immediate period and into a more stable financial situation and reassess the situation then. I hope that this will give the councils some stability, going forward. It has been announced that furloughing will go on until October, so I hope that that gives them some relief and that they can also make savings on schemes that they would otherwise have spent money on in the first half of this year.

Mr Durkan: There is some fantastic, positive news in the Minister's statement. That is very welcome, and my question should in no way be construed as a criticism of the response thus far.

There has been reference to businesses that have fallen through the holes in just about every safety net that has been put out there, and the Minister mentioned the hardship fund in his answer to Ms Sugden. However, that funding has criteria that are quite prohibitive. I can think of a couple of examples in my constituency of successful —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can you come to a question?

Mr Durkan: — businesses that are significant employers and important service providers but have been unable to avail themselves of any assistance. I know of someone who had been renting premises off a charity — it was not readjusted for rates — whose employee numbers disqualify them from the hardship fund. Can the Minister give a commitment to work with the Department for the Economy to establish some type of mop-up fund or final safety net for such businesses to ensure that none of them go to the wall completely?

Mr Murphy: I absolutely assure the Member that I will continue to work with the Department for the Economy, as we did on the £10,000 scheme and the £25,000 scheme. We held £40 million in reserve, and the intent was that it would be for a mop-up scheme to get all the others.

I recognise what he said about some of the criteria for applications and how they seem to have made it difficult for certain sectors to access schemes. You only really get a sense of the sheer variety of circumstances in businesses when you create a scheme to support people. You find all these people who fall outside it for a variety of

reasons. It is almost impossible, given the timescales that we are trying to do this in, to devise something to catch everyone. Nonetheless, I had hoped that the £40 million hardship scheme would be the one to capture all those who have fallen through the cracks, but it seems that some people have still been missed. I am willing to work with the Department for the Economy to ensure that we give support where we can. The Department for the Economy has policy responsibility for that. All we can do is give advice and assistance in relation to that, but we do not want a situation in which, because of the criteria, people involved in businesses that genuinely provide a service to the community do not get any assistance.

Ms Bailey: I am looking at the figures in the statement and those given by the Communities Minister previously and hoping that I have got my sums wrong. There is a £99 million scheme to cover a three-month rates holiday for all businesses, which means that it costs about £33 million per month. As we extend that by another month, I assume that that will cost an average of £33 million again. The extension of a rate-free financial year to some businesses is a measure to try to save those businesses, and that, of course, is very welcome. However, I go back to the stress on councils. Given that this is largely an income loss for the councils, which collect the rates, and the fact that the Communities Minister announced a package of only £20.3 million for councils for the next few months, it does not add up. The Minister mentioned that councils could make savings, for example, by not funding community festivals that are not happening, but what is being done to prevent councils going out of business? Is any preparatory work happening in the Executive to plan for the loss of those local institutions?

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that this is a loss of income rather than an award of money. It is a loss of income over the year. Hopefully, some of the businesses that benefit from this will be able to stay open. Clearly, were no initiative taken in relation to rates, there may well have been a loss of rates income to us anyway. We will absorb the cost of this. The Executive are absorbing the cost of the rate relief to the end of the year. The burden will not be placed on the councils.

Mr Carroll: I want the Minister to expand on the measures in place and those needed to protect and support workers at this time, particularly those who have not been furloughed and have to visit food banks. I have mentioned the pattern across the world where the ratio of businesses to workers being helped is 4:1, and it seems to be the case here, with the Minister announcing £700 million support for businesses through rates and grants but, from his Department, only £4 million for sub teachers. I note that there is no rate relief for workers. Support for the business community is clearly necessary at this time, but some feel that the measures with no strings attached do not address the situation, with some businesses being able to receive government assistance at the same time as laying off staff. The Minister will know that workers are central to the economy, so can he comment on the lack of action to support workers and say what measures are in place to ensure that employers support workers at this time?

Mr Murphy: The employee retention scheme is based on people holding on to their staff, and they apply for it on that basis. It sounds almost as if business is a separate section and it is all fat cats who are getting the money in their

back pocket: the vast bulk of the £700 million to business is going out to small and medium enterprises, which are the backbone of the economy here. They earn a wage from their business and, in turn, employ huge numbers of local people. Any support to business is not simply about somebody's profit margin; it is about keeping business alive, keeping the economy alive and keeping workers in jobs. Rate relief and things like that for the commercial sector are about keeping the doors open and keeping employees in place. That is the primary intention of all this. It is not about gifts to individual business owners but about keeping the doors open. As I said, the intention of the furlough scheme is to keep employees in place, and that is the basis on which people apply. That is important in the time ahead.

We recognise that the economy will suffer as a consequence of this. Of course, workers in public-sector employment are getting their wages. We recognise that the economy will suffer as a consequence and more interventions will be required. As it stands, we have a limited ability to make those interventions. If further interventions come from London, we will try to use them as wisely as we can to sustain the economy here and to have the maximum effect from that. When we focus on business, it is about keeping businesses and workers in place and keeping people in jobs. That is the primary effort.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): There is only one more Member to ask a question on this occasion. I invite other Members who wish to ask a further question to rise in their place for a short period, if they have a burning question. I hope, with your cooperation, to finish this side of the lunch break at 1.00 pm.

Mr Allister: I very much welcome the relief that has been secured for the substitute teachers. That was an inequity long needing to be addressed, and that is good. I was hoping, though it is not the Minister's responsibility, that, in liaison with the Department for the Economy, there might have been some good news for the haulage sector. What I really wanted to ask the Minister was this: I want to better understand the Treasury rules and the departmental approach to furloughing in the public sector. He has already said that the Treasury frowns on it, to put it at its mildest. Yet, we have councils who have had authority to furlough. Will he explain how that works and what are the rules about that?

Mr Murphy: First, I know that there was significant work or discussions between the Department for Infrastructure, the Department for the Economy and, I think, the Department for Transport in London about the haulage sector and it was concluded that an intervention was not necessary at this time. I do not have the detail as to why, but I know that part of the transportation money that we had been holding back was in anticipation of a request in that area. That did not emerge, and we went ahead, then, with the allocation to Translink.

As far as I understand it — the Member will forgive me if I repeat the information incorrectly; I will get the advice that we have from Treasury to him — the Treasury was initially very reluctant to furlough public sector workers on the grounds, I suppose, that it would end up paying for them twice. However, it conceded with regard to cases where workers could not be redeployed elsewhere and there was a loss of income to that public sector area associated with them not doing their jobs. There was a third rule that

escapes me at the moment, but they had to satisfy those criteria.

Our responsibility in relation to that is to provide advice to other Departments and to say, "This is the broad view of Treasury. If you have a sector or an arm's-length body in your Department and you think you might be able to avail yourselves of this, it will save you in terms of ongoing losses". Councils are a particular example of that, and museums might be another sector that has furloughed workers. I am sure that I can get information to the Member on what sectors have been furloughed to date. Councils came forward, particularly in relation to leisure centre workers who could not be redeployed elsewhere and where the council was losing revenue as a consequence of those people not being able to work. They were not able to work because of the restrictions as a consequence of the pandemic. There are guidelines and rules and regulations in relation to that. We gave advice to the various Departments and said, "This is what Treasury tells us. If you think that you have a sector or an arm's-length body in your Department that might fit that approach, come back to us or go directly to the Treasury to make your application". Obviously, in some cases, some councils have met the criteria and have been able to furlough workers and save a cost to the council as a consequence. In a number of areas, Departments have been able to do the same. I am happy to provide that detail to the Member and the rules that the Treasury have given us in relation to that.

Mr Boylan: Thanks for letting me in again. I appreciate what the Minister has put out today in his statement. I know that a lot of the schemes cover a lot of groups, but I am still being lobbied from the infrastructure side in relation to the taxis industry, which feels that it has been left short. What discussions have there been at Executive level and which Ministers have made an approach for support for the taxis industry?

Mr Murphy: No specific proposition has been put to me in relation to taxi drivers. I am not aware of any being put forward in an Executive context. I know that there was some suggestion that taxi drivers might meet the criteria for some of the self-employed schemes, but I am not certain how that has played out because that sector does not fall under my departmental remit. I occasionally hear remarks from people in relation to taxi drivers, but no specific scheme has been put to me to seek support for them. Perhaps, they have been able to avail themselves of the self-employed scheme.

Mr Durkan: In response to my previous question, the Minister mentioned some of the convoluted situations that had arisen and had prevented businesses from getting assistance. Some of the rates-based assistance has been very welcome, but a number of people still have not been able to access it. The deadline is looming — it is imminent, in fact — and there seems to have been an issue with a lot of those people's payment details, with Land and Property Services (LPS) denying having their account details —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): And the question?

Mr Durkan: — when, in fact, they have been given to them, in some cases, four or five times. Will the Minister look at extending the deadline for people in that situation?

Mr Murphy: My belief is that, once the application is in the system, it has met the deadline. The deadline does

not mean that, if you have not received your money by this week, you are not getting it. There have been all sorts of anomalies in relation to it. I have had people come to me directly, as, I am sure, you have had. I pass them on to LPS to get a response. LPS has been proactive in responding. I have heard that outside the Department: people have been praising LPS for the quickness of response on some of these matters. Some of them are complex and difficult to resolve. If information is missing, it is, sometimes, hard to get it. If there are particular instances, contact LPS directly as an elected representative, and you will get a response.

1.00 pm

Mr Muir: I am concerned about the response in relation to the logistics package, because a lot of local hauliers were holding out for that support. Is that money still being held as match funding to go with the Department for Transport, or has that hope evaporated? If that is the case, a lot of businesses will be worried about their future, because it will mean potential closure.

Mr Murphy: I can report only what was reported to me. With the agreement of the Executive, I was holding £95 million for transportation issues. We allocated some of that to the airports and the ports. The Infrastructure Minister had a bid in for Translink, and I understand that there were discussions between Infrastructure, Economy and the Department for Transport in London in relation to the requirement for that sector. I have been told that no case was being put forward in relation to that. I do not have the detail as to why that was the case. However, I assure the Member that, if that arises, as I said in my statement, £60 million is still being held in relation to transportation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of questions to the Minister of Finance on his statement.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet after 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

The sitting was suspended at 1.02 pm.

On resuming —

2.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The next item of business is a motion to approve a statutory rule. I call junior Minister Declan Kearney to formally move the motion.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Iarraim cead an rún seo a thabhairt chun cinn. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I have some advice to give to Members; then you will be allowed to take the Floor. Do you wish to move the motion?

Mr Kearney: That is basically what I was in the process of doing, Mr Deputy Speaker. I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Thank you. The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit to this debate. I remind Members that the Business Committee has agreed that, under current circumstances, Members may rise in their place if they wish to be called to speak during debates or on any other occasion. That is the usual way of the getting your name onto the Speaker's list. Members may also inform the Business Committee or approach the Top Table. Those remain valid alternative options.

I now call the junior Minister to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Kearney: A LeasCheann Comhairle, agus a Chomhaltaí, it is now some eight weeks since it became necessary for the Executive and Assembly to introduce the extraordinary measures which have so drastically affected the way we live our lives and go about our business. No other legislation in living memory has caused so much disruption. Life as we know it has been turned on its head. It has separated people from family and loved ones who happen to live in different households. Businesses have been closed and economic activity paused. The regulations have stopped us from going beyond our homes, except for limited purposes.

A short piece of legislation that, like the tiny microbe whose name is in the title of our regulations, has had serious and far-reaching consequences, beyond which any of us could ever have imagined. However, that is where any comparison ends because, unlike coronavirus itself, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations have saved lives.

Beidh cuimhne ag cach go raibh muid ag dúil le scéala ní ba mheasa roinnt seachtainí ó shin. Only weeks ago, we were preparing for the prospect of 15,000 deaths in

the North, and then for a reasonable worst-case scenario of 1,500 fatalities. These regulations have protected our health and care services and they helped preserve societal well-being. They are a key to help us lift the lockdown. COVID-19 has wreaked a terrible havoc upon us and, very sadly, for many people that has meant the loss of a loved one.

My heart goes out to all of those who have lost family and friends. Currently, up to 482 people have died in the North, as well as in excess of 2,029 souls on our island and tens of thousands of lost lives in both Britain and Ireland.

I am sure that I speak for everyone in the Chamber in saying that our thoughts and sincere sympathies go out to all who have been bereaved and who are suffering the pain of loss at this time.

I send good wishes to those lucky enough to be out of danger and have begun recovery, including personal and family friends. I extend solidarity to all our health and social care heroes, and many other key workers, who have been on the front line in the fight back against COVID-19.

Is cúis díomá domhsa nach bhfuil aon réiteach cuimsitheach éifeachtach ar an ghalair seo ar fáil dúinn láithreach. It is an unfortunate reality that we face. We are in the midst of a major pandemic health emergency for which, at this time, there are no quick fixes or ready-made solutions. We can be sure of this: we will be managing the emergency for some considerable time to come. We are unlikely to see a return to a new normal way of living in the short to medium term. That means that we have to accept the fact that we will be living with the threat of the virus in our midst for some time, and we will need to keep managing our behaviours to minimise the risks of spreading the infection. These are extraordinary times and getting through them will necessitate the continuation of extraordinary measures, to some extent at least.

On Tuesday last week, the Executive published a document that seeks to strategically chart a way through the crisis. That is a route with passing points, which we will only cross when the science says that it is safe and right to do so. I will say a bit more about the Executive's plan in a moment.

First, I want to return to the motion that is before us. I would like to remind Members of proceedings on 21 April, when the Assembly considered and approved the original regulations, which of course were made using emergency provisions in the primary legislation. Those were made and came into operation on 28 March, in the knowledge that democratic scrutiny by the Assembly would have to follow afterwards. That approach was brought about solely because of the urgent prevailing circumstances.

The content of the regulations is, of course, something that we are all now quite familiar with. There are three main aspects. First, they impose restrictions on business, and many have had to close altogether. Secondly, there are restrictions on gatherings of more than two people, other than in certain, exceptional circumstances. Thirdly, there are restrictions on movement, with no one allowed to leave home without a reasonable excuse. There are also provisions for enforcement, and penalties that range from fixed penalty notices to fines of up to £5,000 on summary conviction.

Gan amhras, is rialacháin tromchúiseacha iad seo agus fíor-dhúshlánach dúinn go léir. The regulations contain very serious measures which have far-reaching implications for every single person. We, as elected representatives, bear a heavy responsibility for ensuring that they are kept under constant review so that they are not retained for one day longer than is absolutely necessary. The importance of that was recognised from the outset, and the regulations have built-in protections to ensure that there are frequent and robust reviews of all the measures.

Regulation 2(2) requires that the “restrictions and requirements” are reviewed:

“at least once every 21 days”.

Regulation 2(3) requires that “any restrictions or requirements” must be terminated as soon as the Department of Health considers that they are “no longer necessary”. Those are powerful legislative protections.

Since the regulations were first introduced on 28 March, they have provided the basis for several reviews that have been conducted by the Executive. A first review, completed on 15 April 2020, resulted in no changes. Then, on 24 April, it was agreed that the requirement to close burial grounds to members of the public should be lifted. It was also agreed that it would be helpful, when doing so, to clarify the circumstances in which a person may leave the place where they live to take exercise. Following a further review on 7 May, it was decided to continue to maintain all the remaining restrictions and requirements for the time being.

Last Thursday, following the publication of the Executive's approach document, the Executive announced the easing of other restrictions in the context of taking another cautious step towards the new normal. As a result, garden centres and ornamental plant nurseries may be opened to customers; marriage ceremonies can take place if one of the partners, or an immediate family member, is terminally ill; and household recycling centres can reopen.

Yesterday, on the basis of the latest scientific evidence and expert advice, a number of other easements were agreed. For instance, up to six people who are not from the same household may, now, meet outdoors. Churches may open for private prayer. Some sports, such as golf and tennis, can recommence. Drive-in church services, cinemas and concerts are also to be permitted. Those changes will be reflected in further amending regulations that, it is hoped, will be made later. They demonstrate the Executive's commitment to reviewing the regulations, and signal our determination to act decisively when the evidence and advice show that the time is right.

It was, however, the changes that were made following the review on 24 April that have led to the amendment regulations that are the subject of the debate. Those changes — the easing of restrictions on access to burial grounds and additional clarity on travelling to take exercise — were arrived at through sound, proportionate and careful judgements by the Executive, all of which was governed by the expert advice of the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser.

Those judgements were based on striking the right balance between citizens' mental health and well-being and ensuring that people were not put at risk of transmission of coronavirus. They take into consideration the very real

comfort that being able to visit the graveside of a loved one brings to people. They also recognised that further clarification was needed in order to help people to make the right decisions to enable them to meet the rules that govern restrictions on movement. The amendment regulations give effect to those simple but important changes.

The actual amendments are as follows. Regulation 4, which deals with restrictions and closures, is amended to remove the requirement to close burial grounds to members of the public. A new regulation, 4A, has been added to ensure that adherence to social-distancing rules by those who visit burial grounds is applied. That regulation imposes a duty on a person who is responsible for a burial ground to take all reasonable measures to ensure that a distance of at least two metres is observed between every person at the burial ground, except between members of the same household.

In addition, regulation 5, which deals with restrictions on movement, is, therefore, amended to include the need to visit a burial ground to pay respects to a member of a person's household, family member or friend as a reasonable excuse for a person to leave the place where they live. Finally, regulation 5 is also amended to clarify the circumstances in which a person may leave the place where they live to take exercise by providing for reasonable travel to exercise.

These amendments are small but significant and important steps on the path to recovery. These and others in the future will be made by taking account of the ongoing critical situation whilst giving hope for the future. None of us wants the restrictions to remain for one moment longer than is necessary. Citizens, communities and businesses are suffering. People are having to make huge personal sacrifices as a result of the regulations. However, it is important to emphasise that the regulations are key to winning the fight against COVID-19. They are an essential means by which to fight back against the pandemic. They need to be taken in context with the Executive's five-step plan, adherence to best international guidance, the need to implement a programme of universal community testing, contact tracing and isolation, and, importantly, a whole-government and whole-society partnership. That integrated approach represents our effective recovery road map to move towards a return to more normal ways.

We should be absolutely clear: the regulations are working. Tá ag éirí leo.

They have saved lives. In fact, they have saved a great many lives and they have prevented our health system from being overwhelmed. Aided by the comprehensive guide published by the Executive last Tuesday, we are now beginning to see a slow pathway to recovery unfold.

2.15 pm

The guide identifies three essential criteria for consideration in the Executive's ongoing reviews of the regulations. First, evidence and analysis relating to the pandemic, and that will include: the latest medical and scientific advice, adherence to World Health Organization guidelines, the estimated level of transmission within society and the impact that any regulations may have on the future trajectory of the pandemic. Secondly, the capacity of the health and social care services in our society to deal with coronavirus cases whilst also returning

to the delivery of normal services. Thirdly, assessment of the wider health, societal and economic impacts of the regulations, including the identification of areas where we can secure the greatest benefit and lowest risk as a result of any relaxations.

The approach of our five-party, power-sharing Government is logical and measured. It provides for decisions to be made based upon science and expert advice, with room enough for common sense, but, make no mistake, we remain in a critical situation. Our public health message has not changed: stay at home and save lives. What the Executive will not countenance, in reviewing the regulations, is being rushed into making premature, reckless or uninformed decisions, whether as a result of artificial deadlines or simply to match actions that are taking place in other jurisdictions.

The clear scientific assessment is that the pathway of the pandemic is on the island. It makes sense to develop common approaches. The Executive have a duty to give clear leadership. Ní mór dúinn ceannaireacht leanúnach shoiléir a sholáthar amach anseo. So, the Executive will do what is right, in the right sectors, at the right time, for our citizens, exercising the sort of good judgement that has been apparent in all the reviews to date. Our commitment to all we serve is to succeed by continuing to save lives and protect public health. However, this is a marathon, not a sprint. The small changes that we are debating today are an example of the Executive's careful judgement, and I, therefore, commends the regulations to the Assembly. Molaim na rialacháin.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I welcome our newest Assembly Member, Cara Hunter, to the Chamber.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office. The Committee very much welcomes the regulations, and I look forward to hearing from the Chairperson of the Health Committee on the formal deliberations that took place on the legislation.

Members of the Executive Office Committee were acutely aware of the relief that was felt across the North when it was announced that cemeteries would reopen. In that context, I will reflect on what it means to some people to visit a cemetery. For many, it is an important part of the grieving process. It is an acknowledgement that the deceased has not been forgotten and is still very much part of their life. I am sure that I was not alone in my sympathy for bereaved relatives who were so distressed about not being able to visit the gravesides of their loved ones. It was particularly heartbreaking to listen to those who were recently bereaved talk about the devastating effect that the closures were having on their mental health and ability to cope with the loss. For them, the reopening of cemeteries was an incredible comfort and a great joy at a time of such sadness.

Of course, you do not have to have been recently bereaved to feel the effects of the closures. Many people visit graveyards for reflection and to experience the solitude and sense of calm that a cemetery can offer at times of distress or anxiety. That is why the closures had such an impact on so many. Nearly everyone is living through some level of distress or anxiety because of the pandemic.

In welcoming the reopening of the cemeteries, I also want to stress the importance of maintaining a social distance,

regardless of where you are. Social distancing will play a major role in creating the right environment where further restrictions can be lifted and we can begin to inch closer to what we see as a normal way of life. We are seeing evidence of that already with the reopening of garden centres and household recycling centres. Those centres could only reopen because of the impact that social distancing is having on the reproduction rate of the virus. I urge everyone to show discipline and compliance and I look forward to the lifting of further restrictions, but only when it is safe to do so.

I will now make a number of points in my capacity as an MLA for South Down. We are seeing frequent changes to the regulations and that is to be expected. I welcome the fact that we can move towards normality — or the new normality — as it will be known. I urge, though, for as much clarity as possible. After every announcement, I am sure that all Members see their inbox light up with various questions, queries and requests to find out about individual, bespoke cases. Where you can, I urge you not to use generalised terms, such as sports, open spaces or businesses, without clarifying what that means for people. In some cases, it builds up hope only for that hope to be dashed whenever clarification is sought.

A recurring theme, and one that needs to be developed, is what we can do for our over-70s and those who are shielding. Leaving them with no hope after every announcement and just saying that they will have to stay at home is not going to cut it. We need to champion their cause so that they can have a social outlet and some communication with others or we will be storing up a problem for the future, with health and mental health being impacted. They are feeling the pain of isolation and it is only fair that we respond to that pain and do what we can to help and to give them hope.

I have also had calls from people who are asking that the medical advice and guidance be published. People want to believe everything that they are hearing but some are struggling. If we are to be a truly open and transparent Government and Executive, I ask that the guidance and support is fully published.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Éirím le huasdátú a thabhairt don Teach agus le smaointe an Choiste Sláinte a thabhairt ar na rialacháin. I will update the House on the Health Committee's consideration of the regulations. On 3 April, the Health Committee was briefed by the Chief Environmental Health Officer who advised of the two main purposes of the regulations, as mentioned by the junior Minister: to amend previous regulations to facilitate the opening of cemeteries and to clarify the rules around leaving home to take exercise. The Department explained that, due to the urgency of the situation, it was not possible to bring an SL1 to the Committee in advance of laying the statutory rule.

The Committee raised two issues on the statutory rule. First, health protection in cemeteries, and, secondly, the requirements of those with autism or complex needs. On the issue of cemeteries, the Department advised that responsibility for the protection of workers and visitors rests with those who manage a site and that some may choose not to open if they feel that they cannot meet public requirements. With regard to the revised description of the rule around exercise, the Committee was advised that the amendment clarifies that travel for exercise

may be reasonable in certain circumstances. Whilst the regulations do not specifically mention those with autism or disabilities, the Chief Environmental Health Officer advised us that revised Cabinet guidance from 8 April covers those matters and provides extra flexibility for those with medical conditions.

He also confirmed that the PSNI had been taking that into account in applying the reasonableness test. The Committee was further advised that the Department is aware of the fact that, whereas the guidance refers to exercise in line with a care plan, not all those with complex needs have a care plan in place and that work was ongoing to address that situation. The junior Minister may be able to confirm any progress on that and on whether it has been communicated to the PSNI. The Chief Environmental Health Officer also advised that work was almost completed on a draft template letter that families could request from their local trust and could carry with them confirming that a member of the family has particular needs that require travel for exercise. Again, it would be good to hear whether that has been advanced or progressed.

It was suggested in Committee that, for those with autism and complex needs, the issue was wider than the need for exercise. It was put to the Department that going out for a drive can be part of a wider approach to the care and management of challenging behaviour as it can be a calming mechanism, a coping strategy and a way to prevent self-harm or harm to others. Further to a suggestion that it would be helpful to confirm that families trying to cope in such difficult circumstances would not be penalised, the CEHO said that he would feed that back to the learning disability unit to see whether something could be done, although he also said that the PSNI were aware and were taking into account individual circumstances.

The Committee agreed that it was content with the statutory rule subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Examiner has now reported on the SR and has raised no issues.

Ba mhaith liom cúpla focail a rá anois mar urlabhair sláinte Shinn Féin fosta. I would now like to say a few words as the Sinn Féin spokesperson for health. The health protection regulations that came into effect on 28 March this year have undoubtedly saved lives across the North. In the face of the unprecedented challenge that the COVID-19 virus presents to our very way of life, from the way that we work to the way that we interact with loved ones and even, sadly, the way that we say, «Goodbye», the Executive have introduced measures that have altered our whole society while protecting health and social care services. The COVID-19 virus has brought unthinkable worry, pain and grief to all our communities. To all who have lost a loved one, a neighbour or a friend, I offer my sincere condolences.

Through strict observance of the regulations and much personal sacrifice and hard work on the part of our communities, we have reached a stage where a careful easing of the restrictions is possible. It is hoped that, as we move through the next weeks and months, we can safely lift and ease more lockdown measures, noting as we go that this virus is no more a respecter of timelines than it is of borders. However, every easing of the lockdown must be guided first and foremost by scientific and medical evidence. Any relaxation of the guidance on the restrictions must be in accordance with the World Health

Organization's guidance that, first, transmission of the disease is under control; secondly, health and social care services have the capacity to test, trace and treat every case and to trace every contact of the COVID patient; thirdly, our health service has the capacity to cope with a second wave of the virus with adequate PPE, ventilators and so forth in place; fourthly and crucially, nursing homes and other hotspots are identified and the risks in those settings minimised; fifthly, the risk of importing new cases can be managed; agus uimhir a sé, faoi dheireadh agus thar aon ní eile, go gcoinníonn muid ar bpobal ar an eolas agus go dtacaíonn muid leo mar is ceart, all our community, including harder-to-reach communities, are engaged, informed and supported appropriately at this time and as we move through the measures.

Our relaxation of the restrictions must be carefully crafted to allow the flexibility to change course when needed. Ní mór dár gcinntí a bheith tomhaiste agus eolach agus a bheith déanta de réir na cúinsí eagsúla in ár bpobal agus de réir na tíreolaíochta. Our decisions at this important time must be measured and informed and done in a way that suits the particular circumstances of our communities and our geography.

2.30 pm

Mrs Cameron: I put on record my thanks to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the junior Ministers and, indeed, the Health Minister as they continue to work throughout this difficult period. While we focus on the relaxation of restrictions, it would be wrong for us to not express our deepest sympathies to those who mourn the loss of a loved one to this awful disease. Almost 490 families in Northern Ireland have been left devastated. That is a heartbreaking statistic, but behind each one is someone who is loved and missed. Our thoughts and prayers remain with those families now and in the days ahead.

The decision to relax restrictions and amend the regulations does not come easy. It is always vital that those decisions are determined by the best scientific and medical advice. Politics must not come into it, just evidence. In that regard, I pay tribute to the expert advisers that we have in Northern Ireland, not least our Chief Medical Officer: thank you for all that you are doing at this time.

As MLAs, we are being contacted daily with the question, "Am I allowed to?". The question on everyone's lips is, "When will we be able to?". People want to know when family life and community life will return to what we once called "normal". In recent weeks, we have all taken small steps. Access to cemeteries was a much-needed and most welcome first step. Who among us did not have a constituent who longed to visit the grave of a loved one — maybe a child or a spouse — who was lost too soon? . The stories that we have received have, no doubt, had a real impact on us all personally, and I am glad that today those graves can be visited. We must also thank our funeral directors and undertakers for their work in recent weeks. It has been incredibly difficult, but, as always, they have carried out their duties with compassion and care, which we welcome. In the coming weeks, I am hopeful that we will see an increase in the number of people who are allowed at the graveside during a funeral, and I encourage the Executive to explore how that can be allowed.

I also commend my colleague Edwin Poots for his action as AERA Minister in handling the opening of recycling

centres in conjunction with the councils and for his recent announcement to permit angling. Yesterday's announcement that outside gatherings of up to six people can take place is welcome. I emphasise that social distancing remains key, along with not sharing hard surfaces. Also very welcome is the opening of places of worship for private prayer and for drive-in worship. Those are necessarily small steps, but they are steps in the right direction. It is important that, in the coming days, we continue on the road map to recovery set out by the Executive. At all times, that must be balanced by the safety to take each step. We must keep the R number down.

The message remains the same: "Stay at home as much as you can. Wash your hands. Keep two metres apart". If we do not heed those rules, we risk going backwards. The steps will save lives and enable society to move forward. The people of Northern Ireland can be rightly proud of how they have responded to the public health messages that have been issued over recent weeks. If we all continue to do that, we will save lives and continue to progress back to normal or a new normal.

Mr Nesbitt: Minister Kearney has not been shy, on occasion, of making the odd political comment during the pandemic, so I would like to make a political point today. After all, his party colleague, John O'Dowd, reminded us recently that this is a political Chamber. The point, very simply, is this: given that we are part of the National Health Service and given the eye-watering amounts of additional money coming our way from Treasury beyond the block grant, I hope that every Member can agree that, irrespective of their legitimate constitutional aspiration, there has never been a better time for Northern Ireland to be part of the United Kingdom. That will need to be factored into any debate on new norms.

Mr Blair: On behalf of Alliance, I thank the Ministers for their statement today on previous amendments to the regulations. I also thank them and their Executive colleagues for the further information that was released yesterday, which will have brought some hope and reassurance to many people. We are reminded, especially at a time when some people are benefiting from reassurance, that there is still much suffering and anxiety in our communities, stress about the road ahead and, of course, grief for those who have lost loved ones. We think of all those people today. It is right that we also reflect today on the huge effort made by people across Northern Ireland to follow advice, adhere to regulations and join together to save lives and protect our health and front-line services. It is that effort that has allowed some relaxation of the regulations that were put in place.

Of course, the limited alleviation of the regulations, just like every other public announcement, will bring further questions. There will be questions about whether it is safe to gather in a particular open space. There might be questions about whether, if a fishery is open, as was announced on late-night television, the forest park around that fishery will also be open. We know that acceding to every request could fragment the coordinated approach to battling the virus. That could lead to an ad hoc development of policy and create uncertainty and have the most serious of consequences, especially if any lack of cohesion led to a second wave of coronavirus. Perhaps, in their response, the junior Ministers will give us their thoughts on two things: first, the need for clear

and consistent messaging from every Minister and every Department so that information is presented from where and when it is expected and is accompanied by the clearest guidance possible; and, secondly, the need to assist the public in developing a common-sense approach to implementing the regulations by reviewing and, if necessary, refreshing the messaging that is out there to ensure that we maximise the audience and hold public attention at all times as things change. We know that challenges to police work in implementing the regulations are ongoing, as witnessed in recent days at the Obel Tower in Belfast and on other occasions. Every effort must, therefore, be made to assist police in their duty. I am pleased to hear that processes are being put in place so that councils can assist with enforcement matters. I look forward to receiving more information about that when the latest updates and amendments are before us, if not before then.

I and my colleagues, like all others, look forward to better times. We are willing to continue efforts guided by scientific and medical advice to get us there. In that light, we are content to support the regulations as amended.

Mr Stalford: Before I go into my remarks, I associate myself with yours, Mr Deputy Speaker, in welcoming the new Member for East Londonderry to the Chamber. It was my great privilege to preside over her signing the book. I am sure that she will have a good time here; at least, I hope she does — we all try to. I wish her all the best.

A free people cannot be expected to live under house arrest indefinitely. We voted eight weeks ago for the Government to have huge and wide-ranging powers. In a free society, such provisions do not sit comfortably with those who believe in individual, property or collective general rights. Our people have endured serious curtailments of their rights in the name of controlling the threat of the virus. The success of the science-led approach is measurable, as the junior Minister said, in the fact that, at the commencement of the crisis, the House was told that we faced the real possibility of up to 15,000 deaths in this part of the United Kingdom. Now, every death is a tragedy, and I extend my deepest sympathies to the families of the 482 people who have lost their life as a result of the virus. Because of the perseverance of our people, this dreadful virus is coming under control, and the terror that it unleashed in all of us eight weeks ago has mercifully not been realised. However, we need to be clear and honest: patience is starting to run thin in the wider public. We need to face that. Others have talked about the need for clear messaging, and I absolutely associate myself with that. It is important that there is a clear and consistent message coming from the Executive at this time. However, as I said in my introduction, a free people will not consent to living under house arrest for ever, least of all in a country like ours, which is the foundation stone — the founding country — of liberal democracy and where freedom means so much.

There are questions that I want answered, particularly in the context of the mixed messaging that people have been talking about. I would like to know from the Government what the R rate presently is. I would also like to know from the Government whether a figure has been established as to what an R rate should look like to enable a more full-blown relaxation of these draconian laws. I would like to know who has provided that figure, if one exists. I would

like to know whether that figure is 0.5, as has been quoted by the deputy First Minister widely in the press. If that figure that has been provided to the Government is not 0.5, where did the deputy First Minister get her figure? They are important questions, and, if we are to reassure our frightened people, they need to be answered here today.

I want to raise the issue of churches. I welcome the announcement that churches will be able to use car parks for drive-in facilities. The Minister will know that I am a member of Ravenhill Presbyterian Church, a church in inner-city Belfast. We do not have a car park, but we have an enormous building. I look around, and I suspect that the interior of our building is bigger than this Chamber. My congregation is being told that it cannot meet, but here we sit. It is important that the messages that we send out have logic attached to them, and that needs to be addressed.

I welcome the relaxation around cemeteries. That is something that I feel strongly about. My father died when I was seven, and, on the day that I got married, I went to his grave; on the day that I was elected to the council for the first time, I went to his grave; and, on the day that I was elected here for the first time, I went to his grave. It is an important place for me, and I absolutely understand, therefore, why it is so important for people to have that in their lives. I welcome the measures that have been announced on marriages. That is the compassionate and the right thing to do.

I think that, overall, we can say that the Government have acted wisely and judiciously, but our people are looking for answers. At the start of this, eight weeks ago, there was a need to impress on people the scale of the threat posed. Now, our frightened and cowed people need to be given hope.

Mr Sheehan: The last time I spoke on the regulations, I was clear that, as a political representative, in normal circumstances, I would never want to introduce restrictions of people's freedom of movement in the way that the regulations do. However, as we all know, we live in extraordinary times, and, even in the past four weeks, the context has shifted slightly. I have no doubt that lives have been saved as a result of the measures that were implemented, and I welcome the fact that there has been some relaxation of the restrictions on some outdoor activities. It is clear from 'Executive Approach to Decision-making' what needs to happen before there is further easing of restrictions. For now, the focus must be on a strategy to minimise harm from the ill-advised relaxation of physical distancing in ways that will trigger further epidemic spikes. Therefore, I commend the Executive for closely following the advice of the World Health Organization when setting out their guiding principles for considering whether a specific restriction or requirement should be retained, withdrawn or modified. Those principles are clear and easily understood.

Of course, it is right that we should follow the guidance of the World Health Organization, given that it has the most experience in fighting previous epidemics, such as SARS, MERS and Ebola. More importantly, it is those countries that closely followed World Health Organization advice that have been most successful in controlling the spread of COVID-19.

2.45 pm

There has been quite a lot of backslapping here by people who believe that we have done well in tackling the virus. That may well be true in comparison with our neighbouring island, Italy or Spain. However, let us look at South Korea, a country with a population of 51 million. Seoul, the capital city, is only a two-hour flight from Wuhan, where the virus is alleged to have started. The South Koreans did not have the same restrictive lockdown that we are experiencing. They did, however, have a first-class system for carrying out widespread community testing and contact tracing. They tested and traced the virus until they had it under control. Despite some new clusters, the South Koreans have managed to keep it in check. There have been only 263 deaths, and not one of those deaths was in a care home. Not one of those deaths was in a care home.

The Health and Social Care Committee at Westminster heard recently from a research fellow at the London School of Economics that anyone in a care home in South Korea with suspected COVID-19 was immediately isolated and, if they tested positive, removed to a quarantine centre or hospital. She finished her evidence by saying that not a single person has died from COVID-19 in a South Korean care home. Contrast that with here, with a population of just 1.8 million, where we have had around 500 deaths, depending on which data you read. Almost half those deaths have been among the frail and the elderly in care homes. Of course, the South Koreans were prepared for the virus, and we were not. Many will say that the South Koreans had experience of dealing with previous viruses, such as SARS and MERS, so they were much more prepared than we were.

Of course, the weakness of our preparations was exposed in October 2016 by Exercise Cygnus, a pandemic simulation, and the necessary remedial steps were not taken. If anything, the state of preparedness has worsened since 2016 as a direct result of underfunding to the NHS and public health infrastructure.

What needs to happen next? The World Health Organization, as quoted in the Executive document, is quite clear:

“Transmission is controlled. Health system capacities are in place to detect, test, isolate and treat every case and trace every contact. Outbreak risks are minimised in special settings like health facilities and nursing homes.”

I have to express serious concerns about the Health Department being able to meet those criteria.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can I bring the Member back to the legislation that we are discussing? I am allowing all Members considerable latitude, but please do mention the relaxation legislation that is under debate.

Mr Sheehan: Of course, the legislation is related to the situation on the ground. When discussing relaxation measures, it is important that we know what has to happen and what criteria have to be met.

There are still serious problems with the rate of transmission in care homes, as well as concern about the infrastructure being put in place to carry out contact tracing. So, let me deal with contact tracing first. On March 12, a decision was taken in London to end contact tracing.

For some reason, the same decision was taken here, even though the two situations and the two contexts were entirely different. We are told that the decision here was made on the basis of scientific advice from experts in the field and sound public health considerations. However, we could not interrogate that advice. It is secret; it is not transparent. We do not know who the scientists were who offered the advice, and that is not acceptable.

Last Thursday, three eminent experts gave evidence to the Committee for Health. Professor Anthony Costello totally dismissed and disagreed with the assertion that the decision to end community testing and contact tracing could have been based on sound public health considerations. Professor Costello’s view chimes with the World Health Organization’s advice and the best international practice. Some will say, “Don’t look back, let’s move forward” and that is fair enough. I am not here to apportion blame —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Is the Member going to comment on the legislation? If you are, please reference it.

Mr Sheehan: — but we need to learn from previous mistakes and to make sure that we do not repeat them.

Do we have a system for contact tracing in place? On 16 April, the chief executive of the PHA told the Committee — Jim Wells mentioned this when he asked the Health Minister a question last week at the Ad Hoc Committee — that 500 people had been recruited and were being trained to carry out contact tracing. Three weeks later, on 7 May, when she again gave evidence to the Committee, following a question from me, the chief executive admitted that 500 people were not being trained. So, 500 people had not been recruited and 500 people were not being trained, so why did she feel that she could come to the Committee to give that evidence in the first place? We are now told by the Minister that, actually, only 58 people have been trained to carry out contact tracing. Although we know that contact tracing happened at the start of the outbreak, we do not know how many were involved, but if only 58 people have been trained in contact tracing, it seems to be totally inadequate. We have had months to get contact tracing right.

As things stand —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, order. Will the Member please take a seat? I have asked the Member on a number of occasions to please reference the legislation that is in front of us. This seems to be a speech, and he has yet to reference, in detail, the legislation. I will give the Member another chance.

Mr Sheehan: I do not know if we will have the proper infrastructure in place that will allow us to ease the regulations that are being discussed.

Moving on to the situation in care homes, despite the fact that we knew that care homes were being impacted disproportionately by the virus, little, if nothing, was done to protect the frail and the elderly in those settings. Shortages of PPE and a lack of testing have been well-documented. In London, research that used genome tracking found that temporary care home workers unwittingly transmitted COVID-19 between care homes as cases surged. The tracking research into the behaviour of the virus in six London care homes found that, in some cases, workers who transmitted coronavirus had been drafted in to cover for care home staff who were self-

isolating, expressly to prevent the vulnerable people that they look after from becoming infected.

Why is that important here? It is important here because agency workers here are also moving about from care home to care home. I spoke yesterday to a senior manager from a number of care homes who is extremely worried about this. In some cases, care homes have refused to take on agency workers, but, as a result, their own staff are becoming overworked and overstressed. They are now reaching a stage where they are going to have to consider bringing in agency staff. If agency staff are moving about from home to home, if that does not increase the risk of infection, I do not know what does. It is no coincidence that there has been quite a significant outbreak of COVID-19 among staff in Muckamore Abbey. To me, it is no coincidence that a number of the agency staff there moved from a care home in Belfast that was seriously affected by COVID-19.

In the name of humanity, I am calling on the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the regulator of care homes, the RQIA, to get their act together and to put a focus on our care homes that has been absent thus far. I stand with the Human Rights Commissioner and the Commissioner for Older People who are both on the public record saying that not enough has been done to protect our frail, vulnerable and elderly population.

I welcome the moves that have been made to ease the restrictions, and I look forward to other restrictions being eased but not until the proper criteria are met to save lives and protect our citizens.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage Members to reference any comments that they make to the legislation that is in front of us today. They may well wish to make statements on a number of issues, but that is not relevant unless their statements refer to the legislation that we are debating.

Ms Anderson: Every time I come here to speak on the coronavirus restrictions, I take a look at the number of people who have died across the world, which, today, stands at over 320,000 people, with over 2,000 having died across this island. I send my heartfelt sympathy to the families of all those who have died.

As we stand here today to talk about the easing of restrictions, we are still dealing with the same deadly virus that we were dealing with eight weeks ago. The World Health Organization has cautioned against lifting the lockdown measures prematurely, stating clearly that it could lead to a resurgence in the virus. A virus does not become a pandemic by itself. Our behaviour spreads the virus, and, unlike the virus, the restrictive regulations that we are discussing today, which are, without doubt, draconian — and reference has been made to that — have saved lives. This legislation and the five-step programme announced by the Executive last week are the correct and cautious approach, with measures only being relaxed when it is safe to do so. So, I welcome the measures that have been announced and how they are being taken forward.

However, I concur with the previous Member to speak, Pat Sheehan, because, over two months ago, the North stopped community testing. The relaxation of measures happened well before we were dealing with the number of deaths that, unfortunately, we are dealing with today.

The World Health Organization advice at that time was clear: test, trace and isolate. Despite this island being an epidemiological unit, we have not fought this virus on an all-Ireland basis. The restriction of movement, as outlined in the legislation, with no one being allowed to leave home without a reasonable excuse, unfortunately did not prevent the transmission of this deadly virus. We all knew where it would spread, namely, in care homes.

Ministers, I know that, as you come here today to talk about easing the restrictions, you do not have responsibility for the remit that resides in the Department of Health or for devising the policy of testing, and I know that —.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Before I ask my question, I must point out that this is becoming a bit of a pattern of one party in the Executive lashing out all round it and attacking other parties that are working together to try and get us through this crisis. Last week, the deputy First Minister said that the target for the R rate should be 0.5 before easing restrictions. If the Chief Medical Officer tells us that the R rate is 0.5, will her party support easing restrictions?

Ms Anderson: As you know, all parties in the Executive are taking advice from what the Chief Medical Officer says, what the World Health Organization says and all the advice that is out there. I am sure that, collectively, the Executive will make the right call when it is safe to do so, and they will ease the restrictions when it is safe to do so.

3.00 pm

I am sure that the Member has constituents coming to him, as they are coming to me and others in Sinn Féin, expressing their concern that we might be easing the restrictions too soon. People on both sides are concerned, and I share what you said about people getting frustrated and about being imprisoned at home. No one would support those draconian measures, but, as I said to the joint First Ministers last week, the measures that they are putting in place and the five steps that they outlined, are walking us through a process when it is safe to do so.

Please do not say that this is about one party taking a slap at anyone. This is about giving expression to deep-rooted concerns, and you do not have your finger on the pulse of what people are thinking, feeling and have experienced outside, if you think that that is what we are doing here. So do not think that. I would advise the Member to maybe get more involved with his own constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask that all remarks be made through the Chair, please. I draw the Member back to the legislation: please comment on it.

Ms Anderson: OK. As I was saying, the restrictions on movement, as outlined in the legislation, with no one allowed to leave home without a reasonable excuse, unfortunately did not prevent the transmission of this deadly virus where we knew it would spread, namely in care homes.

I know that it is not your responsibility with regard to the Health Department and the decisions that the Health Minister takes — he has his autonomy and he has to make his call. I know that it was not the Executive that made the decision to stop community testing, but I can tell you that, in my constituency of Derry, questions have been asked

about why community testing was stopped. There was no explanation given when we heard about the easing of the restrictions. We have not had an explanation, despite the fact that the Chair of the Health Committee tried to find out what the explanation was, despite questions being raised by public health experts such as Dr Gabriel Scally and others, and despite members of the Health Committee trying to find out.

It is right, as we stand here today, that the COVID restrictions are reviewed every 21 days, and it is right that we get the information that we receive about the easing of those restrictions. I only wish that there had been an inbuilt review to determine the impact that stopping community testing had on our ability to track this deadly virus.

Yesterday, we heard from the Health Minister. He announced rolling testing. That is not in this easing of restrictions, but I assume that all of that is being talked about in how we move this forward. He talked about rolling restrictions for all care homes and all care home residents in the North. A senior medical adviser stated that that will be done some time in June. Now, whilst I welcome that testing for all is finally going to happen in care homes, I cannot help but think that it is too little, too late.

As we talk about the easing of the restrictions, I am very mindful of the fact that, as of 8 May, 269 people in care homes had died of the virus, yet testing is not going to start today, it is not going to start tomorrow, it is not going to start next week after we hear of restrictions being lifted. It is going to start some time in June — June.

Over a month and a half ago, I raised the need to save lives, as the lifting of these restrictions is doing. They are going to save lives. I raised the need to test all residents and staff in Owen Mor nursing home in Derry following an outbreak there, because testing, tracing and isolating every suspected case of COVID is essential for helping to control the spread of transmission and to save lives. Saving lives is at the forefront of what the easing of the restrictions is about.

Some nursing homes had only flimsy masks for PPE. Some told me that they had received what they described as a decree by phone that, if COVID-19 were to spread in their home, they would be on their own. We are here talking about easing restrictions, and the phrase still rolls off people's tongue, "We are all in this together". It is even written in lights as you drive along the motorway. That simply is not true. If you are on a low wage but regarded as a key worker, a hospital porter or a domiciliary care worker and you are listening to how the restrictions are easing, aware that the legislation was put in place to save lives, but you did not have the proper PPE, leaving you more exposed to possibly catching the virus, you do not feel that we are all in this together. The truth is that we never were.

The legislation refers to the capacity of health and social care. What about the capacity of the social care sector to protect its workers? These are the domiciliary care workers and carers in nursing homes who are applauded every Thursday night, but who were left feeling anxious — some felt abandoned — as the restrictions that were put in place to save lives seemed not to protect them. They work round the clock on the front line, morning, noon and night, to take care of the elderly and the vulnerable. Yet, if they fall ill from COVID-19 and have to self-isolate, they are entitled to nothing more than statutory sick pay. Carers

expect that the legislation to ease restrictions will do right by them, will do right by vulnerable older people and will protect all in society equally.

At the end of March, after the legislation was in place and before we got to the point of talking about easing the restrictions, we were still talking about the need to keep the restrictions and why that was important. We talked about how we needed to save lives and to know where the clusters would develop. At that time, I wrote to the Minister of Health, the permanent secretary and the Chief Medical Officer. I phoned and wrote to the Western Trust. I phoned and phoned the RQIA; I wrote, too. I spoke directly to the Older People's Commissioner. I pleaded with them all to use their influence to get all residents and staff of Owen Mor Care Centre tested in order to isolate the virus, but to no avail. Weeks later, we got those who were symptomatic tested. Nearly a month and a half after that, finally, we are told that residents of all care homes in the North are to be tested. We were told that yesterday, but it will not be until some time next month. So, as we stand here talking about the easing of the restrictions that were put in place to save lives, we need to think about how the front-line workers whom we clap every Thursday night have been feeling for all these weeks.

In February, we had the evidence and analysis of COVID-19 clusters. We knew that it would hit care homes. What was the response? It was not to ease the restrictions or put restrictions in place. The response was to stop community testing. Now, we are slowly and carefully lifting the restrictions. As we do so, people are asking — at least, some people to whom I talk are asking — whether deaths in care homes could have been prevented if, weeks ago, the application of universal testing had been in place.

There is no doubt that we need to proceed with caution, as the Minister has said in the Chamber today, and the legislation and the Executive's five-step plan do just that. However, we need the five steps to be accompanied by universal testing and tracing and an isolation regime. No one likes having their civil liberties taken away from them, as has been said, and we all want them returned as soon as it is safe to do so. No one wants a second wave of this deadly virus either.

People's compliance kept the number of deaths down, and the people who did that rightly expect the Executive, and especially the Minister of Health, to do everything in their power to prevent the R rate, whatever that is —. We know where it is standing now and how we are moving out of the restrictions, but they want the R rate to be prevented from rising, and that means test, test, test. Whilst the relaxation measures we are discussing here today are low risk, the best way to prevent a second wave is by simply finding out where the virus is. You cannot avoid a virus if you do not know where it is. It is not rocket science. This can be achieved by reinstating community testing, and I just hope that we do not have to wait until the end of June, or later, for that to happen.

Mr O'Toole: Like others, I support, to the extent that it is relevant, the legislation that we are discussing today. I am slightly in a state of bewilderment, I have to say, having heard a succession of DUP and Sinn Féin Members appear to take pops at different parts of Executive policy, given that those two parties lead the Executive, but I will not dwell on that.

Mr O'Dowd: *[Interruption.]*

Mr O'Toole: Indeed.

Specifically in relation to the regulations, I think that Christopher Stalford, who has now left the Chamber, said earlier that they represent an enormous infringement on our civil liberties. Indeed, Martina Anderson has just said that, and it is of course true. It is worth acknowledging that what the Northern Ireland Executive have had to do, and what jurisdictions everywhere have had to do, is something that no one could have anticipated when these institutions reformed at the beginning of the year.

It is an extraordinarily difficult thing to tell people that they basically have to shut down large parts of their normal lives and that society and the economy cannot continue in the way they did. It is extraordinarily difficult and complicated, particularly in a unique set of governance arrangements such as we have in Northern Ireland, where we have a mandatory coalition and a multi-party Executive.

I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks that there had been some comments from different parties that slightly belied the fact that those two parties run the Executive. That said, I would say that there has been an improvement in the coherence of Executive communications, but my remarks in relation to today's legislation are more about the communications and less about the politics with a capital P.

Yesterday, we were told by the First Minister and deputy First Minister about new easing of the regulations in relation to playing golf and tennis and to groups of people meeting outdoors. Today, we are specifically debating the changes that were announced several days ago around opening up cemeteries and other outdoor premises. A slight and unfortunate pattern has emerged, which is confusion among our constituents. I am sure that many MLAs have had constituents come to them and specifically ask, as I think Pam Cameron said, "Am I allowed to do this? Am I allowed to do that?". A certain amount of that will be inevitable, but I am afraid it is slightly exacerbated by some of the means of communication that the Executive Office, or the Executive in general, have used.

Yesterday's easing of restrictions was announced via a press release, for example. As someone who used to work in Government communications, I have gone through the various channels of the Northern Ireland Executive in order to establish where there is a simple dashboard for people who want to access the information and where it is that they can find it on the Executive home page. They cannot. They can find a news release or a news story about what was announced yesterday. There is not even what is called an infographic to explain it to them.

3.15 pm

If you go on to nidirect, which is the home page for the devolved institutions that is supposed to tell people about local services and how they can access them, it contains a range of information about COVID-19, but there does not appear to be — I may have missed it, although I did give the site a fairly thorough look — any simple, straightforward route or portal for ordinary residents, whatever their views on COVID-19 or their views on the restrictions, to find out when they can play a game of golf or do x, y or z.

That may seem like a pedantic point, but it is extraordinarily important to make it at a time when we are doing what we doing, which, as Members from multiple parties have acknowledged, is infringing on people's civil liberties for the purposes of managing public health and minimising death and severe harm to our society. People want information and to be told why certain restrictions are being put in place. There is an old saying in communications, which is "Show, don't tell". It is extremely important when we are going through this process that we explain to our residents and citizens why certain easings are happening at certain moments and what it is that they are specifically allowed to do. At the minute, we are causing a little bit of unnecessary confusion, and some of that confusion is caused, I am afraid, by Ministers going on television programmes to give their own views about other restrictions that could be eased. Angling, for example. We had a Minister talk about that on the same television programme that I was on. Just a few moments later, I was asked about Executive incoherence over easings. That kind of thing causes confusion, and it is not necessary.

In conclusion, I agree with many of the comments that Members have made, specifically around failings over our ceasing of contact tracing and testing earlier in Northern Ireland. That has still not been adequately explained, given that we were both earlier on the infection curve on this island and have a different demographic and geographic profile, by which I mean that we have a much more rural and dispersed population. It has not quite been explained to us why it was in our specific and discrete interests here to cease contact tracing and testing at the same time as they were ceased in England, which has a much bigger and denser population. Although I agree with some of the comments made, in general I want to limit myself to remarking on the communication of easings, such as they have happened thus far.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the Member to reference the legislation that is in front of us.

Mr O'Toole: As I have done literally throughout my remarks, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not think that I can be accused of straying too far.

My purpose is to say this today: yes, let us continue to be ultra-cautious and very science-driven as we ease the restrictions and move to a new normal, but let us also explain to people exactly what we are doing. Junior Ministers, if, though the Chair, I can give you a suggestion, it is this: let us look at having better communications through the online and digital channels that are available to us, because I am afraid at the minute that communications are going out through slightly confused means. We cannot rely just on the conventional media, important though it is, to do the job of communications for us. That is my encouraging remark on which to conclude my comments.

Mr Chambers: I must confess that I had thought that I had wandered into the wrong debate. I support the controlled relaxation of the regulations, provided that doing so is always based on best medical and scientific advice. I will express a word of caution, however. The one thing that we have to guard against — all of us — is complacency. These baby steps are certainly not an indication that COVID-19 is beaten. It may still have a sting in the tail, so I appeal to all those calling for more relaxation of the regulations that may affect a particular aspect of their life to be patient. What they are doing may be understandable,

but it is perhaps unhelpful, as they may influence others that the virus is disappearing and that it is beaten. It is not. We must still exercise caution, respect social distancing and use good personal-hygiene routines. We may all have helped to save lives, but we have to realise that many lives could still be lost to this virus if we drop our guard.

I did not particularly want to deviate from the regulations, but certain remarks have been made in the House today that have to be addressed and replied to. We heard from the other side of the House about Exercise Cygnus, which was an exercise conducted throughout the United Kingdom in 2016. One of the recommendations to all corners of the nation was to consider increasing stockpiles of PPE to be able to deal with a pandemic like this one. At a recent meeting of the Health Committee, this was discussed, and the Chairman made a comment that, in Northern Ireland, we did not react to the advice from that exercise. In fact, I think his words were that our “planning was not adequate”. It is perhaps useful to recall who the Minister of Health was in 2016 when considering that remark about planning being inadequate.

There has been a lot of criticism of the Executive, but the party on the other side of the House has a number of Members on the Executive. I understand that the Executive operate on collective responsibility, and that is the way that it should be. It begs the question: have the Sinn Féin Members on the Executive been sitting on their hands when all these issues have come about and when all these shortcomings have been identified? Were they sitting with their mouths closed?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to come back to the legislation.

Mr Chambers: Yes. The Human Rights Commissioner was mentioned, and when the testing that is due to start in our care homes in early June begins, I hope that the Human Rights Commissioner will be on hand to protect the human rights of those frail, elderly and confused people in our nursing homes who may not wish to subject themselves — their next of kin might not want to subject them to it either — to what is a very unpleasant and invasive test. I cannot see a situation where we go into nursing homes and literally hold people down as they are approached by medical operatives dressed in full PPE. What distress will that cause to frail people, particularly those who are suffering from dementia? We need to be careful about this mantra of test, test, test in care homes. It may not be the most humane way forward.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the hurlers in the ditch have been out in force today.

Mr Allister: Forgive my cynicism, but I must say that, when I hear two convicted terrorists speak in the House, one about “the name of humanity” and the other about saving lives, I am afraid that my thoughts go to the actions of those who performed the very opposite. Then one of those persons — maybe both of them, in fact — devoted their speech, in large measure, to — I was going to say “veiled”, but it was hardly veiled at all — an attack on the Health Minister and invoked the phrase “all in this together”, but it is pretty clear that some on this Executive are anything but all in this together. I think that those contributions spoke for themselves in that regard.

As for what is before us today, I very much welcome, as I did when it was announced, the alleviation in respect of graveyards. I still, though, have this fundamental question:

why were graveyards included in the first place? The thought of one or two people, who are more likely to be elderly than not, making their way to a graveyard to sit or stand beside the grave of a loved one ever posing a threat to anyone in the spread of coronavirus is hard to comprehend. I am glad that, eventually, the Executive came to their senses and realised that that was an alleviation that had to be granted. It did, in the meantime, though, as many of us, as constituency Members, know, cause a great deal of grief to individuals who were prohibited from performing those functions.

That is the first portion of the regulation, which is welcome in all its parts. Then, we have the amendment to regulation 5, which seeks to clarify the business of leaving your home for the purpose of exercise and underscores the necessity to have regard to all the circumstances. It is a matter of regret to me that, when the original clause was introduced, we had, from some police officers, an overzealous implementation. I think of one case of a gentleman from Coleraine who has health issues. He is not shielding, but he has health issues of which he is conscious. He has a dog. Where he lives, the footpaths are very narrow. Every time that he went out, given how closely people were having to pass him, he felt uncomfortable about COVID-19. One day, having experienced that, he got in his car and drove to the west strand car park in Portrush, four or five miles away. He went to the extremity of the car park, so that he would be well away from anyone. He went there because, as probably everyone in the House knows, the promenade at the west strand is particularly wide. It is several metres wide. He thought that that would be a safe place for him to walk his dog. Yet, before he could even get out of his car, a police patrol came to his window — no PPE, of course — and demanded to know why he was there. When he sought to explain, he was abruptly told that that was no excuse and he would be issued with a ticket.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Stalford: I think that I can probably top the Member's example with the case of a couple whom I know. They were going to the shops in their car and were asked by the police what they were going to buy. They said it was essential food items. The police told them that that had better be the case because they would be checking on the way back. On the way back, they were stopped, and the police rummaged through their shopping to make sure that there was not a bag of Maltesers or something in there that was not an essential.

Mr Allister: It makes the point, as the case of the man whom I am referring to makes the point, of an unnecessary, overzealous approach to these regulations.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with his sentiment in relation to regulation 5(2) and the point of reasonable excuse. Having taken a look at the point, I realise that, under that particular regulation, it prohibits the exercise of non-farm animals such as horses or, as has come to my attention in relation to pigeon racing, the ability for people to exercise their animals, applying social restriction to applicable distances.

3.30 pm

Mr Allister: In my view, the pivotal issue in all of this is social distancing. That has to be the fundamental

protection. Therefore, when you examine individual episodes and ignore all of that, you are not delivering the purpose that the legislation exists for. I hope that the fact that it now expressly says:

“having regard to all the circumstances”

means that we will have a more sensible approach to the issue.

Of course, now that golf courses — quite properly, I believe — are to be opened tomorrow, that inevitably means that it is reasonable in all the circumstances to travel for the purpose of such exercise. So, if someone is driving to the golf club of their choice, in the doing of that they are no longer in breach of the regulations. That is how it should be. If Minister Poots delivers on what he said last week, that by tomorrow week he will reopen the car parks at the forest parks — which is a good idea — then, plainly, someone who drives to Tollymore or Roe Valley or wherever for the purpose of exercise cannot be in breach of the regulations.

However, it throws up some further complications. If a man drives to play his golf, and if he is a caravan owner in that particular town — perhaps he drives to Newcastle or Portrush to play his golf — and he is going to be playing on two successive days, which he would be entitled to do, he is prohibited from staying in his caravan. Why should that be?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. It is, perhaps, a technical point, but it is my understanding that you can only play golf at a golf course of which you are a member.

Mr Allister: I think that that is right, but there are many people who, for example, have the privilege of belonging to some of the prestige golf clubs. I know people from Ballymena who are members of Royal Portrush. When they go to play golf, they will be going to Royal Portrush. Likewise, there are people who belong to clubs in many other parts of the Province.

The point that I am making is that for regulations to be viable and sustainable, they need to have an inherent coherence and they need to make sense to ordinary people. The public have been remarkable in their degree of obedience. As Mr Stalford pointed out, these are spectacularly restrictive regulations. They are something that none of us should get used to. They are something that every one of us should want to lift at the first opportunity because they are so impeding of the rights of us all. If you have regulations that have within them a form of inherent contradiction, then the respect for them dissipates. Indeed, ultimately, they could fall by virtue of disobedience. So, it is important that the regulations have that coherent element of common sense and logic to them.

I go back to the point about the caravan owner. There is quite a cohort of people in the Province who, when it gets to this time of the year, just live for their caravan. They love pottering about it, sitting outside it etc. Take my example of the golfer: if he legitimately goes to play golf in that town, and he is going back the next day, he cannot stay in his caravan. Why should that be? There is an illogicality to that.

A few days ago, I had a lady on the phone with me who was, literally, crying. Her caravan is her life. She was not going to her caravan to party or to parade up and down the main street. She was going to socially distance, she hoped,

at her pride and joy, which is her caravan. The Executive talks much, rightly, about mental health and mental health champions. It is becoming manifestly clear to me that, for some people in that position, it is having a very adverse effect on their mental health. I say this to the Executive: it is time to weave into this approach greater humanity and greater common sense on some of these issues.

Mr Stalford, rightly, asked a legitimate question and, no doubt, Mr Lyons will give us the answer. What is the R number today? Where does it leave us? At last week's Ad Hoc Committee, we were told that it was 0.7. When I asked the Health Minister if he knew anything about the requirement for it to be 0.5, given what Michelle O'Neill had said, he told us that he had never heard of it. That brings us to the fundamental question: are the leaders of the Executive being driven by the real science, not Michelle science? Or, are there other agendas at play? Are there some who want to drag their feet on this? Are there some who are quite happy if the economy of this part of the United Kingdom suffers more damage? I am beginning to think that there might be.

On that theme, we were told last Thursday, in the public media, by the Agriculture Minister, Mr Poots, that on Thursday the Executive had advice from the scientific and medical officers on step 1 and that we were good to go; we were good to go on step 1, with no qualification. Yet, of course, when it came to yesterday, we were not good to go on all of step 1. In-house meetings are still prohibited. What was yesterday's message on step 1 in relation to going to work? Step 1 states:

“Encouragement to those unable to work from home to return to workplace on phased basis subject to legal requirements and best practice arrangements being in place.”

If we were moving to step 1 yesterday, I did not hear a word about what that meant for returning to work. My goodness, when you listen today and hear that unemployment in the month of April rose by 90%, you know that that needs to be central to the thinking of the Executive, or we will have no economy left. What is the direction on step 1 in relation to encouraging people back to work? How are they being encouraged?

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Certainly.

Mr O'Toole: Does the Member agree that no credible economist, either from the right or the left, in any jurisdiction, thinks that there is any means by which you can simply turn the economy back on, not just because of COVID-19, but because people are afraid of what happens when they go back out to shop, or go to pubs and restaurants? Does he accept that creating a simple binary between health versus the economy is not accurate, and is not borne out by economic evidence?

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Probably, after I quickly respond to the Member who spoke previously. I remind that Member that the Executive's matrix, which it published yesterday, said:

“Benefits of each amendment are considered in three domains, wider impacts on health, society and the economy.”

My complaint is that I see secondary, or lesser, or even absent for some, consideration of the economy. I make a plea that the economy is central to that decision, as this matrix says.

Yes, I give way.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member agree that, while it is not a binary choice between public health and the economy — it never can be — the longer vast swathes of the economy are in stasis, and not moving, the much more difficult it becomes to get it moving again. That is the danger.

Mr Allister: Absolutely. The fact is that it is not moving. People are surviving only by virtue of the very legitimate, necessary Government handouts which are coming from the Treasury, as Mr Nesbitt pointed out. That is not a healthy position to be in. It is not one that can continue indefinitely. Therefore, it is one that any responsible Government, putting in place all the protections, particularly the social-distancing protections, that can be put in place, need to be encouraging the restoration of economic activity. Without it, there is nothing left of our economy after this pandemic. Without an economy, what have we? It is not a binary choice between good health and a good economy. It is a sensible choice, between resuscitating the economy where you can, as soon as you can, without imperilling the generality of health.

Let us remind ourselves, the greatest threat from this virus comes not from the economically active, but from mostly the older community. Restoration of economic activity is not something that flies flatly in the face of dealing with COVID-19. Identifying where the problems and the growth in the virus are, is something that can be done in tandem with encouraging economic resuscitation.

I was disappointed that, yesterday, I did not even hear the economy mentioned in the press conference. Baby steps have been taken. They are necessary. I question why one of them was ever there in the first place. I welcome the fact that there will be some easement, I trust, in exercise and travel, and I encourage the Executive to go further.

I want to pick up on a comment that I heard the First Minister make this morning. I was glad to hear her say it, and I want to encourage the Executive as a whole to act on it, and that was to allow small weddings. Already today, two people have been in touch with me about that position. They had their licence for marriage, but the shutdown came. They are very anxious to get married but find that, no matter how small they are prepared to make their wedding, even if they were prepared to have it outdoors, they are not allowed to get married.

I am back to the point that that lacks the inherent logic and common sense that should be there. I appeal to the Executive: please, act on that issue and on the many more issues that you need to act on.

3.45 pm

Mr Carroll: I just want to make a few brief points. The Executive are often presented as an image of unity. I am not sure whether, today, we saw a glimpse of some of the tensions and divisions that normally exist. Maybe the junior Minister can enlighten us on whether that is the case when he speaks again today.

Political questions were referred to. Throughout the crisis, part of the problem has been that we followed London for

too long and too often. The problem with that approach was that London preached and practised the dangerous and ludicrous policy of herd immunity, suspended contact tracing, had a lack of testing and was slow to acquire PPE, to name but a few of the issues.

Turning to the measures that are before us today, while I do not oppose them, provided that safety is ensured for workers — in particular, those who work in cemeteries, which are important places for people to grieve — I urge caution in lifting too many of the lockdown restrictions so soon. The key issue at the heart of this all is what happens when large numbers of workers go back to work. When restrictions were lifted in South Korea, Germany, Italy and other countries, we witnessed new clusters and cases, and that is the risk before us. We cannot rush to lift lockdown measures. That would risk all the sacrifices that people have made and the possibility of more deaths.

I note that, in March, the Health and Safety Executive stated that it had seen an almost 2,000% increase in complaints. I would hazard a guess that that is a lot higher today. We saw the tragic case of the death of a Moy Park worker, and there are still concerns about the health and safety of workers and how they will be protected. I do not think that the Executive have been clear or robust enough with a plan that shows how workers will be protected. The Health and Safety Executive recently received at least 480 complaints, but there are only 28 staff who can inspect sites.

I think that I have asked this question three times from the Floor of the Assembly: will the junior Minister tell us what measures the Executive will take to ensure that workers are protected, especially as new measures to lift the lockdown are put in place?

Mr Buckley: I will be brief. While I welcome the regulations coming into effect, I acknowledge that this was one of the most sensitive areas of the regulations to date.

I remember the last time that the junior Ministers joined us in the House to discuss the need to change regulations to allow grieving families the opportunity to grieve at peace at the gravesides of loved ones. I remember the emotive stories from Mr Nesbitt, Mr Allister and me at that time. I was glad that the issue of burials was resolved. On the same day, we also implored movement to lift waste restrictions and immediate action to allow exercise in parks in urban settings. All of those have been achieved. That has to be welcomed, and we have to note that we have watched how the Executive listened to Members, considered their concerns, edited regulations and brought into effect certain measures to allow for those simple solutions.

Mr O'Toole, I think, raised an important point about communication. I welcome phase one, as introduced by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive on Monday, but I think that we can all testify to the fact that the pace of change does not correspond directly with the pace of change of the regulations. While there is that mixed messaging about those changes, we run the real risk of losing the people. They are now considering those matters and coming up with their own opinions on whether a statutory rule or regulation agrees with the common-sense formulas in their heads, and many are questioning some of the particular points of regulation that have limited their way of life. It is important

that the Executive junior Ministers take on board the point that there must be clarity on regulation changes and that they keep pace with the changing scene and the announcements made by Ministers.

It was mentioned — it is an important point — that some of the regulation changes have had a devastating impact on mental health. We can all testify to the fact that the pursuits and ways in which people find enjoyment are more far-reaching than we could have anticipated. What is one person's cup of tea may not be somebody else's, but we understand their need to find those outlets in life to ease the mental pressure that they face. The regulations before us deal with changes to regulation 5, which was mentioned by Mr Allister: the "reasonable excuse" point of the legislation. That point runs the risk that public opinion will run ahead of it. That has to be taken into consideration. Mental health can cover different pursuits; it does not have to be personal exercise, as is mentioned in the regulation. We know that many people find a form of exercise, mental therapy and relaxation in other sports. I mentioned that outdoor pursuits, whether that be walking, climbing or country sports such as shooting, are all activities that, if we applied the common-sense formula, should be permitted under the regulations.

As the Agriculture Minister has done, I look for clarity on this matter and, hopefully, a change to regulation 5(2), which prohibits the exercise of non-farm animals. That can range from horses to, in my case, the sport of pigeon racing. The Assembly may note that the sport of pigeon racing is practised widely across Northern Ireland. To date, participants have been unable to exercise their birds because of the "reasonable excuse" element of regulation 5(2), which excludes the exercise of animals. I implore the junior Ministers to take that point up with the Executive to ensure that a common-sense approach is applied. Something like that could be changed with relatively little effect.

One thing that has come to light is that, when the regulations were introduced, some of them were draconian. That has been mentioned, and Members are now becoming fully aware of that. That should never sit comfortably with anyone. However, we have got to see the real fabric of our society and what many people's interests, hobbies and therapies are, whether they be cross-community or otherwise. We have seen the depth of society. We must keep the people with us on this.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that one of the benefits of the Executive's plan to come out of the coronavirus lockdown in a staged way is that there are review points in it? Some people have argued for very rigid dates and that a, b and c should happen on certain dates. The Member has raised the point about pigeon racing. I, too, have been lobbied on that subject. The Executive's plan allows for flexibility, whereby issues can be raised with Executive colleagues and they can review them and come back with decisions that are based on scientific advice. The fact that the Executive can review constantly and that the process allows for the implementation of safe activities on the basis of scientific advice is welcomed.

Mr Buckley: By and large, I agree. Earlier, points were made about burials, access to urban parks and, indeed, refuge. Those issues were brought to the Floor of the Assembly. Those points were aired across the Chamber, and we eventually saw changes in that regard. However,

the main point is that, while there are no fixed and rigid dates, we must see a speed of action from our Executive colleagues to implement the changes to regulations to keep pace with the changing environment via the phased approach introduced by the Executive.

I look forward to continued conversation with Executive Ministers and, indeed, the junior Ministers to discuss how we can implement and change regulations to keep pace with society and the changing cultures and viewpoints. We have to apply common sense. We have to realise that there is a mature society in Northern Ireland that can exercise its right to do hobbies, simple sporting activities or otherwise in a socially restricted manner and at no stage be a threat in relation to coronavirus. We must take that point on board. I look forward to further engagement with the Ministers in that regard.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):

I welcome today's debate and thank Members for the contributions that they have made. I also take the opportunity to thank the Assembly secretariat for all the work that they have carried out, which has meant that we can continue to meet here and that the Assembly can continue to discharge its scrutiny role. We have been able to do that in a safe way, and we are in a fortunate position. Of course, to a great many people, life is far from normal at this time. The battle against COVID-19 has turned the world on its head and is on a scale that no one could have foreseen. It is a battle that has played out right here and now, and we all have work to do to combat the virus.

That work has paid off. At the end of March, when the restrictions and requirements contained in the regulations came into effect, the scientific modelling suggested a reasonable worst-case scenario in the region of 15,000 deaths. However, that estimate now — largely as a result of the regulations — is only a tenth of that figure. That is a considerable achievement and provides the clearest possible evidence that the regulations are working. The regulations have saved many lives, and I commend the way that we, as a society, have adhered to them. However, whilst the regulations have been good at doing what they were designed to do — stopping the spread and incidence of the virus — we must not forget that the potency of the measures means that they also have some serious side effects on how we live our lives and go about our business. I would never have believed that such restrictions would be needed or, indeed, that they could be made to work.

It is also important that we keep a close watch on the damaging side effects that come with the regulations. They have resulted in an economic and social crisis. I do not underestimate how difficult a time this has been for our people. I have had business owners on the phone with me in tears, concerned about the future of their business. I have heard from people who are desperate to see their children and their grandchildren again. I have heard from people who have expressed their anxieties and fears and expressed the fact that they feel lonely because they have not been able to interact with other people. We must not, therefore, become complacent about the restrictions and requirements imposed by the regulations. They must not be allowed to become the norm. It is imperative that we do not allow the damaging effects of the measures to be allowed to continue for a moment longer than necessary. Although the statutory requirement is for a review of the measures at least every 21 days, the reality is that the Executive

review them on a constant basis and will not hesitate to make changes immediately if the science and expert evidence allows for that to happen; in fact, it is required by the regulations. That is why, when it became apparent that it would be possible to ease the restrictions on access to burial grounds, the Health Minister moved to introduce the amendment regulations that we have been debating today 12 days ahead of the next formal review point.

4.00 pm

The publication, last Tuesday, the 'Executive Approach to Decision-Making' document means that there is now a blueprint for the review process. The incremental structure for assessing progress contained in it will help speed up decision-making in key areas. That is why, on Thursday last week and again yesterday, the Executive were able to make a number of informed decisions, based on expert advice, to further ease restrictions in response to prevailing local circumstances and needs. There will be more relaxations to come, in the days and weeks ahead, as we ease our way forward on the path to recovery.

I will turn to some of the points that Members have made today. Not unexpectedly, given the gravity of the subject and the all-pervasive nature of the measures contained in the original regulations, it has been a wide-ranging debate and, in some cases, an extremely wide-ranging debate. I will try to touch on all of the key issues that were raised.

I want to thank Mr McGrath for his acknowledgement of the positive benefits in the opening of cemeteries. I agree with him, and the point was made very powerfully by other Members, about the mental health benefit of allowing people to go and visit the graves of their loved ones.

I also agree, and Mr Allister raised this point as well, that social distancing is the important thing. It is the key to our success as we move forward. I also understand his desire for clarity about around issues as they are announced. It will not always be easy to anticipate every single scenario, but we will certainly do all that we can to provide the advice that people are looking for.

He also mentioned the over-70s and the guidance and advice that has been given to those who fall into the vulnerable category. However, I remind the Member that the regulations do not restrict the movement or activities of those who are in the over-70 category. It is advice from the Public Health Agency that they need to take extra care. I want to make sure that we can do everything that we can to help them to return to their normal lives as soon as possible. The key in all of this is reducing community transmission, and we need to do all that we can to help with that.

The Chair of the Health Committee, Mr Gildernew, made a number of points. I want to emphasise to him, and for the benefit of the Committee and the House, that the Health Department has been working closely with the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency to clarify UK guidance that enables people with autism or a learning disability to leave their home for exercise, including travel beyond their home. That guidance was placed on the Public Health Agency's website on 6 May.

Additionally, a template letter has been shared by the Health and Social Care Board with each health and social care trust for use by families, upon request, in support of such circumstances. Correspondence, issued by the

Department of Health, to the Assistant Chief Constable on 7 May asked that that be drawn to the attention of PSNI colleagues. The PSNI is currently applying a reasonableness test to determine whether travel can be justified in any given instance. That is a reasonable and pragmatic approach to enforcement on this issue.

I thank Pam Cameron for her comments, and I echo them, with regard to the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Officer and their teams. They have been under a huge amount of strain, no doubt. They have a very difficult and demanding job. They have carried out their work diligently and in a way that we are all very proud of. It is right that we put on record our thanks to the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Officer and their teams.

I also completely agree with her remarks about funeral directors, and I commend them for their sensitive and professional engagement with bereaved families.

We have been asked a lot of questions today, with people wanting to know, "When can I do X?", or, "When will we be allowed to do Y?". I assure all Members that we will not retain these measures any longer than we have to. It is worth repeating that, in making decisions, the Executive will consider three key criteria: the most up-to-date scientific evidence; the ability of the health service to cope; and the wider impacts on our health, society and economy. When we can, we will make sure that people know about this as soon as we can and give them certainty so that they can set out their plans.

Mike Nesbitt did a very rare thing in the Chamber: he made a brief and succinct point. I congratulate him on recognising that brevity is not a vice. It is important to acknowledge that, as the Finance Minister announced today, we intend to spend over £1.2 billion on actions to help with the effects of COVID. The vast majority of that has come from the Treasury, and an unknown amount of resource has come as a result of the job retention scheme. It is important that we acknowledge that we have been able to use the resources that have been provided to us to help our people, and I hope that we are all pleased and can agree about how we have been able to help our citizens.

John Blair made comments, which I completely agree with and endorse, about how citizens' behaviour has led us to this point. That is the key to defeating the pandemic. We are going to be effective only if people adhere to these regulations. By and large, they have been, and I thank people for that and for doing their duty.

On the other point that Mr Blair raised, Minister Swann signed a declaration on 15 May to designate councils as an additional enforcement body for the purposes of regulations 3 and 4, and a set of amendment regulations, also made on Friday, include provisions to allow councils to issue prohibition notices and fixed penalty notices. I understand that the PSNI and councils are discussing joint working to operationalise future enforcement and to clarify roles.

Christopher Stalford made comments that I am sure we all agree with — I hope that we will all agree with them — about wanting to live in a free society. It is of course extremely uncomfortable for me to have to stand here and ask for regulations like these to be brought in in the first place. I understand the effect that they are having on the freedom that we have — freedom that was hard-won — and our not being able to exercise it at this time is very difficult.

Where lifting restrictions is concerned, I confirm to him that we listened to the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Officer. We now have the matrix in place, and the information is fed through that and then we get the information back about whether we can relax more of the restrictions. Obviously, the details that he asked for about specific numbers are a matter for the Department of Health, but it is important to note that when we are discussing the R number it is not just about where it is on any one day; it has to be about the trend of where it is at. Even if there is no change in the R number, that does not mean that we will be prohibited from changing regulations, because as long as the R number is below 1, there is a reduction overall in the transmission of the disease, and that is what we want to see more of.

The approach sets out that it is not just about the R number and that, overall, it is the evidence from an analysis of medical and scientific advice combined with the capacity of the healthcare system to cope, along with the wider impacts that the regulations are having. All those things are taken into consideration before we decide to relax the restrictions.

Mr Blair made specific points in relation to worship. In the cases of churches like his own — I think it was Ravenhill Presbyterian Church that he mentioned — it may not be possible to conduct drive-in church services. There are many people who are doing online services, but I know that that is no substitution whatsoever for public assembly and public gathering. However, where we are able and allowed to relax restrictions, we are doing so, and I hope very much that the evidence will soon show that we are in a position where churches can reopen for public worship. I look forward to that day.

I welcome Pat Sheehan's support for the Executive's strategy and agree with him on the need for a measured, thoughtful and evidence-based approach. Like his colleague Ms Anderson, he raised a number of operational matters relating to the management of the disease. He will appreciate that those are not matters for the legislation, but I will certainly let my colleague the Minister of Health know about the comments that he and his colleague Ms Anderson raised.

Mr O'Toole rightly emphasised the need for clear and straightforward communication to citizens. It would be helpful if we could get, as we move through the process, a graphic that shows where we are, perhaps for each sector and in some cases within each sector, at each stage. Like the regulations themselves, we will keep that under review and continually look for ways to improve.

Mr Chambers said that COVID-19 is not beaten yet, which is absolutely the case. It will not be beaten by restrictions alone either. We have to work together to combat the disease by following the restrictions, and I completely agree with what he said. He mentioned a specific point in relation to testing; there are some sensitivities that need to be addressed. He is absolutely right: there are human rights considerations that we need to be conscious of as well. There may be residents who do not consent to being tested or may not be able to consent to be tested because of dementia or other illnesses. Those issues have to be very carefully considered in a sensitive way.

In relation to other comments that were made, I want to pick up on a few things that Mr Allister said on

enforcement. It is regrettable that the issues that he and Mr Stalford raised took place. We are in a better place now, and the police are more aware of their responsibilities. It is obviously an operational matter for the PSNI, but Mr Allister has put his concerns on record, and I hope that the changes that we are implementing in the regulations today will lead to less of that sort of enforcement.

In relation to the caravan issue, I have sympathy for the argument and have also had many constituents contact me about it. I understand the mental benefits of being able to be in your caravan. That issue will be assessed against the scientific and medical evidence, along with the other benefits that it might bring. We are not yet in position to bring in those regulations. I understand the anomaly that Mr Allister raised in relation to this, but of course if we were to say, "If you're going to play a round of golf, you can go and stay at your caravan", lots of other people might say, "Why is he allowed to go there when I am not?". So, we have to look at those things in the round, but I understand the points that he made in relation to that and the point that he made in relation to looking at the science. It should not be for us, as politicians, to give scientific advice if we do not have the necessary qualifications. I have an AS level in biology, but that does not qualify me to make any judgement, and Mr Allister seems to agree with me on that. So, we will leave it to the experts and take and follow their advice at all times.

4.15 pm

On encouraging people back to work, we have moved along the stages from certain aspects of work being permitted to those being encouraged. We are grateful for the work of the engagement forum, which has set up guidance to show people how they can get back to work safely. We certainly encourage that and thank the group for its work. The Economy Minister has said that she will take forward an economic recovery plan, which we welcome. He also mentioned a specific issue in relation to the part of stage 1 that we did not go through. The advice on Thursday is the same as the advice that we got today: it is not currently considered acceptable to move to family members mingling inside. We had hoped that it would have been. I would certainly like to be able to visit my family again, and I hope that they want me to visit them. However, we are not in that place right now, so we have to wait. That decision was based entirely on the scientific evidence that was provided to us.

Some people have asked why we do not have dates in the regulations or why some parts of stage 1 are moving forward and others are not. It is because of the regulations that we have to adhere to. The regulations state that, as soon as any restriction is not necessary, the Health Minister must terminate it. So, we wanted to terminate the regulations on part of stage 1 rather than moving together all at once.

Finally, he mentioned small weddings, and I completely agree with him on that. Obviously, the key thing will be social distancing but, if a couple want to get married in a small group, I would like to see that happen. We have asked the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser to look into that, and hopefully we can move to that position.

Mr Carroll raised health and safety concerns. I draw his attention to the extensive guidance that has been produced by the Health and Safety Executive, the PHA and the engagement forum that was established by Minister Dodds. Do not forget that we already have robust health and safety legislation — it already exists — and the enforcement authorities will take their responsibilities very seriously.

Mr Carroll: Thank you for giving way. For his attention, the 'Belfast Telegraph' on 31 March stated:

"The First Minister and deputy First Ministers [sic] said those firms not enforcing health authority guidance could face tough action."

Does he know how many, if any, companies have been subject to tough action as a result of not following health and safety measures?

Mr Lyons: I do not have that information available, but I am more than happy to ask the Department for the Economy to write to the Member on it. The Member will be aware that the Health and Safety Executive has undertaken a number of unannounced inspections on high-risk premises, and I hope that those will continue.

Mr Buckley mentioned public opinion running ahead of the regulations and a range of outdoor activities such as pigeon racing. As I have said, the regulations cannot possibly cover every possible activity, nor do they need to. I draw Members' attention, when they are considering the plan, to the definition of steps at the bottom of the second table, as that will give our current position in the process and the basic principles that need to be applied. We cannot cover every single scenario, but we hope that those words give a little bit of guidance. Of course, if there are specific issues that people want clarity on, no doubt they will contact their representatives or ourselves; we will be happy to answer them. It is important that a common-sense approach is applied. The Executive can and will review a range of activities, but that must be based on the evidence and an assessment of risk.

In conclusion, there will be regular debates in the weeks and months ahead as scientific and expert advice allows for more amendment regulations containing further relaxations across key areas to be made. However, that will only be possible for as long as we are winning the battle against COVID-19. We are not without hope. We have begun our journey back to normality, and we are moving in the right direction. I know that many of us want to go farther, but the easiest and fastest way for us to get there is to adhere to the rules that are in place now. As noted previously, we are in the strange position of seeking Assembly approval for legislation that we want to see repealed as soon as possible so that we can get on with tackling the challenges that will come with the next phase of the crisis and which are fast looming. There is the challenge of strengthening our resilience in a world where the virus remains prevalent, the challenge of rebuilding our economy and the challenge of restoring health and social care by investing in its capacity and, above all, by investing in its brilliant people.

On that note, I would like to take this opportunity once more to pay tribute to all our health and social care staff. They are true heroes, and I say to every one of them: thank you. Thank you for what you have done, thank you

for what you continue to do and thank you for making our health and care systems so great. These regulations have also had a huge impact on the elderly and most vulnerable in our society, and it has been extremely encouraging to see communities rally behind them. So, I want to place on record my thanks to all those community organisations, sports clubs, faith groups, cultural groups and the loyal orders who have done so much to make sure that those in need are taken care of.

We look forward to the days when we can further relax these regulations. We are not there yet, but we make a start. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes while we change the staff at the Table.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members who are leaving the Chamber, please do so. Other Members should resume their seat.

The Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to move

That the Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker and Members. It is good to see you all. Contrary to rumours, Mr Stalford and I did not go to the same hairdresser. *[Laughter.]* It is a do-it-yourself job. I see that Mr Dunne is practising a bit of cleaning-up work. MLAs do have other uses and can do other jobs. That is good to see.

The Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 implement the derogation from the crop diversification requirements for the 2020 scheme year, which I announced on the 26 March 2020. This is possible under article 69 of regulation 1307/2013, which provides for a power to derogate from the requirements in an emergency. The resulting regulations are subject to confirmatory procedure, as provided for in the operability amendments to EU law.

The regulations were made on 30 April 2020 and came into operation on 1 May 2020. The confirmatory procedure allows the regulations to come into operation quickly, which is important, given that applications for 2020 direct payments have to be made by 15 May, and farmers need certainty about their requirements.

In brief, crop diversification requires farmers who have between 10 and 30 hectares of arable land to grow two crops, and those who have above 30 hectares of arable land to grow three crops. There are some exceptions, as well as specific requirements that crops must cover certain percentages of arable land. In 2019, 316 farmers had a two-crop requirement and 333 had a three-crop requirement. I should point out that the derogation applies automatically to all farmers and that individuals will not have to make a specific case. It is important to note that both winter and spring plantings have been impacted by the high rainfall, although you would not know it now. However, it certainly was the case in February.

As the House will be aware, Northern Ireland had a particularly wet winter, with rainfall over the December to February period of 399.8 millimetres, which was 127% of the 1981-2020 average. Indeed, February of this year saw the highest rainfall for that month since records began: 222.7 millimetres, which was 267% of the 1981-2020 average. That left farmers facing waterlogged and impassable fields when planting decisions were being made in March. I therefore came to the view that farmers were not able to comply with the crop diversification requirements in 2020 or could do so only with great difficulty. Therefore I announced the derogation that the regulations seek to implement. England, Wales and Scotland are implementing similar derogations for the same reason.

In relation to the Republic of Ireland, the EU has not put in place a derogation from the crop diversification requirements for 2020, but the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) has announced that it will consider force majeure, where farmers cannot comply with the crop diversification requirements due to the weather.

I appreciate that, since the derogation was announced, there has been a prolonged period of dry weather, but that does not alter the situation faced by farmers in March when planting decisions were being made. The decision applies to 2020 only; it is not a long-term policy announcement. To sum up, it is my view that the regulations should be approved in order to provide for an automatic derogation from the crop diversification requirements for the 2020 scheme year. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I take this opportunity to represent the views of the Committee.

The crop diversification rules were introduced in 2015 as part of the greening requirements under the EU common agricultural policy. It meant that farmers who adopted or maintained farming practices to meet environment and climate goals were rewarded with a green direct payment. The rules placed an obligation on the farmer to plant two or three different types of crops, depending on the size of the farm. Since then, arable farmers have continued to abide by the rules, with 316 arable farmers planting two different crops, and 333 planting three different crops in 2019.

The spell of adverse weather over the winter made it difficult for farmers to comply with the crop diversification requirements. February saw sustained periods of rainfall; it was recorded as the wettest month on record. Arable farmers expressed concern that they would not be able to plant the usual range of crops required under the regulations in order to meet the obligations of the greening payment.

That led industry representatives to request that the Department consider the unique circumstances that arable farmers found themselves in and ask whether a derogation from their crop diversification requirements could be made.

4.30 pm

The Department brought forward an SL1 for consideration by the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on 6 May. Whilst broadly content with merits of the statutory rule (SR), the Committee questioned whether the derogation would be applied automatically or if the farmers would have to apply them themselves. We heard that they would apply automatically. The Committee also enquired about whether a similar derogation had been introduced in the South of Ireland. The Department advised that arable farmers were being asked to submit an application for force majeure. Finally, given that crop diversification regulations are a part of the overall greening requirements, the Committee was keen to know if there would be any adverse impact on the environment due to the derogation that was being applied. The Department advised that there would be no detrimental impact on the environment, due to the short duration of the derogation. The Committee

considered the SR on 14 May and agreed that it should be confirmed by the Assembly.

I want to make a couple of comments not in my role as Committee Chairperson but in my spokesperson role for Sinn Féin. DAERA has proven itself a Department that can be flexible in responding to the needs of our rural community. That is true of the crop diversification regulations before us, which, on the basis of last year's figures, will have a beneficial impact for upwards of 600 to 700 farmers out of the 23,000 farm businesses that we have in the North. There are examples of good work, such as the partnership work that the Department has been engaged in with the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy in helping to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis.

In supporting the motion today on behalf of the party, I also say that there are other instances, I fear, where the Department has not shown the same flexibility in responding to local needs, and I will give examples. The Department was strident in its decision to axe the area of natural constraint (ANC) payment to farmers in less-favoured areas (LFA) but, so far, has failed to implement the motion passed in the House in March that called for the restoration of the ANC scheme. The Department was also swift to halt the transition towards a flat rate of single farm payment entitlement, again disadvantaging ANC areas, but, so far, has not provided support to farmers, for example, in the Sperrins whose farms, buildings and livelihoods were destroyed by a huge landslide in August 2017. Similarly, the Department did not take on board the Committee's wish for a sunset clause in the Agriculture Bill and demonstrated no flexibility on the 15 May deadline for the return of single application forms. In failing to do so, it has not taken into account the pressure that that has caused for elderly farmers and farm agents in areas with no broadband, while in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On behalf of my party, I am happy to support the derogation, as it is a sensible response to the unique circumstances that farmers found themselves in earlier this year. However, I stress that the Department must work harder to extend the same responsiveness across all sectors.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I allowed the Chairman leeway to wander from the content of the provisions before the Assembly because he is the Chairman — the chairman of the board. Other Members will not receive the same leniency.

Mr Irwin: I will make my comments short. I welcome the crop derogation. We had an extremely difficult autumn and winter for planting winter and spring crops. Farmers across Northern Ireland will very much welcome the derogation. It makes sense, and I commend the Minister and his Department in regard to it. I also commend the Minister for his continued hard work on a number of issues on the agriculture front. He has worked tirelessly to bring forward a package to help farmers, so I wholly support and congratulate the Minister in his tireless efforts at this difficult time.

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome the derogation, particularly in the light of the very wet winter that we had, with the difficulties that that poses the farming community. The COVID-19 pandemic and crisis has taught us many things, but one is who the important people are and the important roles that farmers and those

who provide, prepare and serve our food play, so it is important that we support them at this time. If the Minister allows, I will tell a story that my father used to tell me about a neighbour. I am from the Montiaghs area, and, in the wintertime, this farmer used to sign on the dole. They used to ask him how many acres of land he had, and he used to say, "Well, in the summertime, I have 21 acres, but, in the wintertime, I have three". I am sure that the Minister will be able to work that one out. I am sure that many farmers face that difficulty in trying to eke out a living.

Many farmers are custodians of the countryside. As we know, many farmers do not want to retire, and they work on. We all know about the difficulty in enticing young people into farming. I very much welcome this support. It is the right thing to do at this time.

Mrs Barton: "What a wet day", "There was a lot of rain last night": those are statements that we are all too familiar with in Northern Ireland, a country where the weather has a great impact on our lives and on our economy, including agriculture, which is, perhaps, the most weather-dependent sector of the economy. The land conditions determine when cattle can be released out to grass after winter housing. The seasonal warming in spring determines when one shears the sheep and the condition of the soil determines the sowing of crops. This winter, especially in February, the weather was particularly adverse, presenting huge problems for arable farmers working the soil, due to the waterlogged conditions when the crops should have been planted. It, therefore, became impossible for the farmers to adhere to the greening requirements under the CAP and comply with the two-crop diversification rule, resulting in them being non-compliant and needing a complete derogation from the crop diversification requirements for the 2020 scheme. The regulations will give farmers certainty and permit them to grow only one arable crop that has a later planting time and is exempt from the crop diversification regulations introduced in 2015. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

Mr Blair: In keeping with the position taken by the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, referred to by the Committee Chair and others, I rise on behalf of Alliance to support the regulations. I offer support recognising that the derogation is limited in time and in scope and that, hopefully, there will not be any adverse effect on the overall efforts and aims to assist in the greening of farming through environmental schemes. It appears that these actions are aimed at a few hundred farmers out of the many thousands in Northern Ireland. It is, therefore, fair to assume that costs are minimal, if any.

It is important that we recognise and react to the problems that faced arable farmers following a winter that brought record rainfall. Such a situation will have introduced additional difficulties and challenges separate from crop diversification issues. The regulations, of course, bring with them reminders of other factors apart from weather-related and seasonal matters and the responses required at times to assist our agriculture sector. The processes that are currently in place are enacted in the context of local alignment with EU regulations, in accordance with the withdrawal Act, although those arrangements are in place only until the end of 2020. We need to give serious consideration to how we deal with those matters post 2020. The clock is ticking, and circumstances, not

least in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, present additional difficulties in preparing for the future.

Principal Deputy Speaker, in keeping with your instruction to limit speeches to the remit of the regulations, I will miss any further reference to the Committee's publicly expressed desire for a sunset clause to be introduced to the Agriculture Bill. I will sum up by saying that what I see before us is a very relevant example of local issues requiring local solutions. Perhaps, in his response, the Minister can expand on his thoughts on how local and regional factors, not least the proportionate importance of agriculture in Northern Ireland compared with other regions, can be factored in to catering for these specific needs in the future. Other than that, I am happy to support the Bill.

Mr Givan: I join colleagues around the Chamber in paying tribute to the Minister for bringing this forward. I am a townie who lives in the countryside. I am from agricultural stock. My grandfather had a large farm up in Dungannon, but the family moved to Lisburn. Like you, Principal Deputy Speaker, I was brought up in the concrete jungles of our towns, but I very much value and appreciate what our farmers do. Now, more than ever, as a lot of the townie folk have been out in the countryside, they appreciate even more what service our farming community does to the whole of society. There is a much greater appreciation now of farmers and the importance that they have, particularly in the supply chain and what they do in getting food on people's plates.

Farmers in my constituency raised concerns with me around the weather and the implications and, potentially, any penalties to the single farm payment as a result, so the derogation is an important step in providing support to the farming community, who need it at this time.

The Chairman of the AERA Committee indicated a number of areas where, he felt, the Minister and the Department needed to do more. The Chairman should be thankful: I am sure that other Chairs of Committees would love to have a Minister like this Minister to report to their Committee. Fighting for the fishing industry, he got a package to support them. He championed our garden centres and got the result. He championed anglers and got the result. There is more, Minister, that I want you to do, and I want you to assure us in your response that you will keep fighting for those areas within your responsibility, as you have been doing.

In respect of farmers and the further support that we need for our farming community, a £25 million package was secured today and announced earlier. Will the Minister provide an update to the House on how that will be administered to provide support to farmers who have been impacted by COVID-19?

I commend the Minister for the work that he has been doing and encourage him to do more, because the people support him in what he has been doing.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The Givans moved from Dungannon to Lisburn: maybe, one day, they will make it all the way to Belfast.

Mr Poots: I will respond to Members, starting with the Chairman of the Committee. I am happy with the support that he has given as Chair of the Committee. With reference to the issues that he raised, in terms of ANC, as I explained at the time, that would have had to be taken out of the budget that existed and redistributed. There was no additional money to spend, so I could give money to ANC

farmers only by taking it off other farmers. The remarkable thing is that, when we get the figures in, they demonstrate that the lowland farmers are actually less profitable than the upland farmers. That is what the figures say, and they are hard to argue with. Consequently, we would be taking money off farmers who earn less to give to farmers who earn more. That is not something that I could stand over in any way, shape or form.

We will look at issues in terms of how we can better ensure that farmers will, over the period, be best able to manage their business, be profitable and to encourage that to take place. Ultimately, farmers do not want handouts; farmers want profitability. That is our aim: to make our farms as efficient as possible, to get the best possible prices, to market ourselves well and to ensure that the premium product that is produced in Northern Ireland is marketed as a premium product. We should not compete with commodities from other countries that are not of the same quality. We should market ourselves as a premium product and get a premium price, which would help ensure profitability.

I thank other Members for the points that they raised. Mr Givan asked about the £25 million. I would have liked a lot more than £25 million. I sought more, but that is what we managed to achieve from the Department of Finance, and I welcome it. It is good to have something to go back to our farming community with in this time of need. That will be targeted at those who are impacted most as a result of COVID-19 and the downturn in prices. At the moment, that appears to be mainly beef and dairy farmers.

That is a matter for discussion with the Committee and the farming bodies over the next couple of weeks. I want to make a decision very quickly and start to get the cheques through people's doors within a short time, as opposed to engaging in a long debate on who gets what. From the outset, I will be honest: as always, someone will miss out. However, we will try to get to as many people as possible who have been impacted by this.

4.45 pm

Mr McAleer asked whether derogation will have any detrimental impact on the environment. It will have the opposite effect. Winter crops tend to need more spray and fertiliser than spring barley. This year, winter crops have not been planted, and there is probably an abundance of spring barley being planted. Growing a decent crop of spring barley takes less spray and fertiliser. Consequently, it will probably have less environmental impact. I am not convinced by the greening that was introduced by the European Union. Spring barley in particular, and perhaps spring wheat, can be grown with a very modest input. Consequently, this year's derogation will probably be better for the environment. I trust that that will help to reassure Members. I welcome the opportunity to bring this forward. It will have a beneficial impact on the relatively small number of farmers who are affected. I thank Members for their support today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while the Minister of Justice takes her place.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill to Northern Ireland.

The Private International Law —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, Minister, but I have to inform Members that the Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I now call the Minister.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill deals, as its name suggests, with the implementation of international agreements in the field of private international law. Private international law rules are applied by litigants in courts to cases involving a foreign element. Typically, the rules cover jurisdiction — for example, which country's court should hear a case, which country's law should apply to resolve it, and whether the decisions of a foreign court should be recognised and enforced. The rules apply to civil law cases, including commercial, insolvency and family law matters, and are a technical and highly specialised area of law. Without private international law rules, businesses, individuals and families in Northern Ireland engaged in cross-border legal disputes face more uncertain, expensive and longer proceedings.

Countries may enter into international agreements on private international law with other countries to ensure that the same rules are applied on a reciprocal basis. The Bill ensures that these international agreements can be implemented in our domestic law in a timely way. With only two substantive clauses, it is a short Bill, and the legislative consent motion is concerned with extending the whole Bill to Northern Ireland.

The Bill has two key functions. First, it implements in domestic law the three Hague conventions which currently apply in the UK, but the UK's participation in them is linked to its EU membership. The UK will be an independent party to these conventions in its own right at the end of the transition period, and the Bill is required to ensure that there is no gap in the domestic application of these conventions.

Secondly, the Bill creates a power to implement future private international law agreements through secondary legislation. Without this, primary legislation would be required for implementation of each new agreement. This power is also likely to be required before the end of the transition period.

The UK has a dualist legal system in which an international treaty ratified by the Government, although binding in international law, does not alter the laws of the state unless and until the treaty is incorporated into domestic law by legislation, such as through this Bill or the regulation powers under it.

On the regulation-making power, the Bill is drafted to respect the devolution position. A Northern Ireland Department may make provision for implementation in Northern Ireland, with UK Ministers only being able to do so with the consent of a Northern Ireland Department. Legislation in this technical area has, in the past, been taken forward on a UK-wide basis, and it may be convenient for it to be so in the future, so I consider this to be a sensible approach. The Assembly or parliamentary affirmative procedure will be triggered if the regulations are implementing a new international agreement for the first time in domestic law; or any arrangements within the UK or between the UK and an overseas territory or Crown dependency; to create, extend or increase the penalty for a criminal offence; or to amend primary legislation. Otherwise, negative resolution procedures will apply.

Having an Assembly Bill specifically for these purposes in place for the end of the transition period would be unrealistic in terms of time frame. This Bill will secure re-incorporation of the three Hague conventions in question across the UK at the same time. Otherwise, we would risk people in Northern Ireland not benefiting from those conventions. For example, without Hague 2007, which covers cross-border maintenance applications, we would risk causing financial hardship for the children of Northern Ireland-resident parents. Similarly, having the regulation-making powers for the end of the transition period ensures the implementation of future agreements in Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the UK. Otherwise, we would risk delaying the benefits of these new arrangements for litigants in Northern Ireland.

I therefore consider that it would be preferable for this Bill to extend to Northern Ireland, and Members will have seen that the Justice Committee's report on this legislative consent motion endorses that view. I appreciate that the Assembly's preference is to legislate on Northern Ireland matters wherever possible, and indeed that would be my own preference. However, in this instance, it seems sensible for the Bill to extend to Northern Ireland for the reasons that I have outlined, and therefore I ask that the Assembly support the terms of this legislative consent motion (LCM).

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am very pleased to speak on behalf of the Committee for Justice in this debate today. The Minister wrote to the Committee in February advising of this potential LCM for the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill, which had been introduced at Westminster. The Minister advised that she was content in principle to support the extension of the provisions of the Bill to Northern Ireland, and that this would see the implementation in domestic law of the three Hague conventions that the Minister has outlined in respect of child protection in cross-border disputes, choice of court in cross-border contracts, and maintenance in relation to rules for recovery of child support and other forms of family maintenance.

The Committee took oral evidence from Department of Justice officials in March 2020. During that evidence session, concerns were raised about other provisions of the Bill relating to the regulation-making powers. Those provisions will allow future private international law agreements to be implemented in domestic law by secondary legislation made either at Westminster or by a

Northern Ireland Department. Members questioned how decisions would be made and whether Westminster or the Assembly was the most appropriate place to legislate, what role this Assembly or its Committees would have if Westminster were legislating, and why legislation would not be made in this place if we had the power to do so.

Following the evidence session, the Committee agreed that it would be useful to determine the views of other relevant Committees in Scotland and Wales on these regulation-making provisions.

Unfortunately, a proposed LCM had not been considered in either jurisdiction at the time, although I understand that one may be being considered by the Justice Committee of the Scottish Parliament today.

In follow-up correspondence to the Committee after the oral evidence session, the Department stressed that the Secretary of State will legislate in Westminster only with the consent of a Northern Ireland Department. The Department advised that, where Justice is the Northern Ireland Department in question, the Minister will notify the Committee in advance on whether she intends to provide or withhold consent. The Department also emphasised that future regulations will not entail significant policy choices but will implement future international agreements in law and make the necessary supporting procedural changes.

When considering that further information, the Committee for Justice noted that the arrangements may also impact on the responsibilities of other Departments, such as Economy, Finance and Health. The Committee therefore wrote to the relevant Committees to draw their attention to the regulation-making powers, which may require those Departments giving consent to the Secretary of State for future regulations under the provisions. I understand that the Committee for Finance has engaged with the Department of Finance and has recently confirmed that it is content with the LCM before the House today.

On 23 April, the Committee considered the memorandum that had been laid by the Department of Justice on 20 April and agreed that it was content with the proposal to extend provisions to implement three Hague conventions in domestic law to Northern Ireland and to create the power to implement future private international law (PIL) agreements in domestic law via secondary legislation in the Private International Law Bill for Northern Ireland by way of a legislative consent motion.

When considering the report on the LCM at our meeting on 30 April, the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Linda Dillon, placed on record her continuing concerns regarding its regulation-making powers, indicating that she was not content with the explanation that the Department had given on the issue. She did, however, indicate that she would not object to the LCM's proceeding. I am sure that Linda will elaborate on that when she makes a contribution. I can confirm, as set out in the Committee report, that the Committee for Justice supports the Minister of Justice in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the legislative consent motion.

I will now speak in a personal capacity. I want to use this item of business as an example of some areas of concern that I have about the business that the House is taking forward. In and of itself, I have no objection to this LCM. I have no difficulty with it coming forward for debate, and I support the ongoing work of the Justice Committee to deal

with such issues that come before it. We will have another LCM coming forward on the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, for example.

I know that all the Committees were asked to write to their Department to ask it to outline what is deemed to be essential COVID-19-related business and that Committees should be receiving only business that is deemed to fit within the criteria. We have continued to receive things that may well be deemed very important, and this is one such example. Whether it meets the test of being essential COVID-19-related business is something that I think could be subject to debate, however. My personal view is that I have no problem with the LCM. I am happy to take it. I am happy for the Committee to continue to receive that type of ongoing work, but it does relate to the broader issue of Members being allowed to submit only two questions for written answer a week; no questions for oral answer being taken in the House; and no private Members' motions being brought forward. Executive Departments, however, are allowed to continue to bring forward Executive-related issues. For example, the Minister for Infrastructure brought forward regulations on electric bikes. Again, I had no problem or difficulty with that. I support that business being conducted through the House, but there is an issue about Executive business and what Ministers regard as being essential.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to resume his seat briefly. I take on board very seriously what the Member raises, and I hope that he will always find in me someone who will defend the rights of Back-Bench Members to scrutinise and hold the Executive to account. I know that some of the issues that he has raised have been discussed at the Business Committee. His remarks are now in Hansard and are there for all time and for all to see. Can we try to get back to debating the LCM?

Mr Givan: I will. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am not privy to the dealings of the Business Committee. It would be inappropriate for me to be so, but I do flag this up as an issue. The Committee is going to have meetings all of the month of June on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which is very important. We will be meeting every week and therefore need to be able to conduct our business. The current arrangements will provide difficulties for the Justice Committee in doing that.

I trust that that is being taken on board at the Business Committee. I hope that it is, because it will be important, going forward, that the Justice Committee is able to carry out important work. Members can table their own private Member's motions, and a lot of us received correspondence over the last weekend. I will resume my seat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

5.00 pm

Ms Dillon: I am sure that you will be glad to hear that my comments will be very brief. I want to put on record, as the Chair outlined, that we highlighted some concerns about the fact that this simply comes back to the Minister and does not come to the Committee. Regardless of what the issue is or how small the matter is, the Committee has a very important role to play, not only in scrutinising and ensuring that it is content with what the Department is doing but so that the Minister has us as a sounding board and as an advisory board, because there is a wealth of experience in the Committee. I am not sure that I include

myself in that just yet because I am fairly new to the Committee, but there is a wealth of experience there and people who have been on previous Justice Committees can give advice on certain matters. It is extremely important that the Committee has an opportunity to look at anything that comes forward, whether it is legislation, policy or guidelines, or whether it is technical. We have an important role to play. Having said that, as has been outlined, it is not an issue over which we should block this LCM, so we support the LCM today. I thank the Minister for coming to the House.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's introduction; it was most enlightening on the principles behind the legislative consent motion for someone who does not serve on the Justice Committee.

There are some important points to make. It is right and proper that seamless protection and safeguards are written into legislation post-Brexit and during the transition period to ensure that important issues such as child protection are legislated for and to ensure that the highest level of safeguard and protection is in place internationally. I welcome that.

I note the Minister's comments on capacity in her Department and, indeed, the fact that this is Westminster legislation that, if I paraphrase, we are piggybacking on and that it is the exception rather than the rule. With that proviso, we are happy to support it as long as this is the exception rather than the rule.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for bringing this forward today. It is a technical LCM but an important one. We are in free fall now until 31 December and we cannot just let these things roll on; we have to address them now. It is right to address them now.

I absolutely support this LCM, but I want to extrapolate a little bit, if I can. The 1996 Hague convention on child protection improves the protection of children in cross-border disputes and helps resolve issues around custody and contact with parents for children who live in different parts. We have our own problems in Northern Ireland, because breaches of court orders in relation to family proceedings are never really enforced. I have a constituent who has sole custody of his children but has not seen them for six years because the case is lost in the courts, with endless legal aid allowing it to go on in perpetuity. Indeed, in speaking about his review of civil and family law, Lord Gillen stated:

"although a judge will do whatever is necessary to keep a parent out of prison, breaches of court orders must be addressed. Parties must not be permitted to wilfully obstruct court orders without consequences."

I raise this issue in brevity, if I can, because there is a real concern that, as we go into this LCM, we have not put our own house in order in dealing with issues like that. We are not enforcing court orders in this jurisdiction, and that will only get more complicated when we start to look at cross-jurisdiction issues.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Member has indicated that they wish to speak, so I call the Minister to make a winding-up speech.

Mrs Long: Thank you to the Assembly for taking time to consider the motion and for the contributions that were

made in the debate. I thank the Justice Committee for its report and the Executive Office Committee for its consideration of the issues at hand. I am pleased with the support that colleagues have shown in the recognition that, on this occasion, it is sensible that the Westminster Bill be extended here.

I will answer a number of issues that Members raised in the debate. First, with respect to the Chair, my understanding of these sittings of the Assembly is that we can bring forward matters that are COVID-related or are urgent. This has a degree of urgency, in that this private international law needs to be in place three months before we leave the European Union, and we need to move in lockstep with Westminster and the other devolved Administrations to ensure that that is possible. I do not control the timing of Brexit, but it will happen at the end of December unless the Government seek an extension, and therefore it is critical that we have these conventions written across into domestic legislation. Therefore, my colleagues in the Executive and I believed that this was of sufficient urgency that it needed to be brought forward to the Assembly and the Committee at this time.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Minister's giving way. I do not disagree with how she has characterised the urgency associated with this. One issue that I would put that private Members are not able to bring forward, for example, is to debate the abortion issue that Westminster will vote on in June. There is an urgency for this House to express a view before Westminster votes. That is an urgent issue to a lot of constituents. Does the Minister agree that the Assembly should debate that issue?

Mrs Long: It is not for me to take a position on the business of the House. That is a matter for the Whips, along with the Speaker to decide. I do not set the agenda for the Assembly; I simply play my part in discharging my duties under it. When it comes to the issue of termination of pregnancy, as you know, it has been decriminalised, so I no longer have role to play in that debate. You would need to take up any issues that you want to debate and their urgency with the Minister of Health.

With respect to the query that I received from Linda Dillon, the issue here is about having swift implementation, so, in terms of what has been proposed, it is in order that, where we are dealing with highly technical and beneficial laws, we are able to move and to have those benefits for our citizens without unnecessary delay. However, an affirmative procedure will be triggered in situations, for example, that will implement an agreement for the first time and that has not been discussed. That will ensure that there is adequate scrutiny from this legislature and that Members are given the opportunity to make a contribution, which I also agree is hugely important in guiding and informing the process.

I welcome the remarks from Dolores Kelly. She is, of course, correct that this is driven by Brexit, and I think that it is hugely important that we are able to do this today. It would be remiss of me not to say that what we are doing today will allow us to continue to operate private international law and to bring the Hague conventions into our law. I understand that, in Westminster, we will also be seeking to join, potentially, the Lugano convention. I think that that application has already been made. Again, that should improve things. We should be under no illusion: we will still be in a suboptimal position with respect to the

agreements that we have at the end of this process. We have, if you like, covered most of the bases, but there will still be more complexity than would otherwise have been the case.

I move to the comments made by Mr Doug Beattie. This is very specific legislation that deals with cross-border issues. It is unfair to say that we have not made progress on dealing with issues around family justice. For a start, as the Member referred to, we have the Gillen reviews, and we now have an implementation plan and significant work is being undertaken in the Department in recognition of that particular challenge. Hopefully with the cooperation of the Committee, we will also be in a position to look at committal reform later this year; looking at speeding up justice more generally. We are taking a number of steps to ensure that we do not have continued abuse, particularly, I think, of the family court system, by those who wish to continue to exercise some kind of coercive control over former partners. That is captured in the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which we debated at length in the House at Second Stage and will no doubt have an opportunity to debate again. In the context that we are in, therefore, I believe that it is appropriate that the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill extends to Northern Ireland and I ask for the support of the House in passing the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill to Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on the Adjournment, I want to remind Members that the next plenary sitting of the Assembly is on Tuesday 25 May. The Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response will meet this Thursday to hear a statement from the Education Minister, Mr Peter Weir.

Adjourned at 5.10 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 26 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Member: Ms Cara Hunter

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Cara Hunter has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Londonderry constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the death of Mr John Dallat. Ms Hunter signed the Roll of Membership in the presence of the Clerk to the Assembly and me and entered her designation on 19 May. Ms Hunter has now taken her seat as a Member of the Assembly. I formally welcome her to the Assembly, and I wish her every success.

Matter of the Day

Troubles Victims: Pension

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Jim Allister has given notice that he wishes to make a statement, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24, on the failure to deliver a pension for victims of the Troubles. If other Members wish to be called, they should do so by rising in their places and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on this subject. I remind Members that, during this period, I cannot take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has been disposed.

Mr Allister: I am grateful, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise this issue. In the week when the leader of Sinn Féin told the innocent victims of the IRA that the actions of the organisation that made them victims were justified, all victims received the kick in the teeth that the pension that they had been long promised was not going to be delivered as promised. That is an appalling failure of Government. To think that those who lost the most in the horrendous Troubles are simply to be cast aside and told that what they were promised by Government is not now at this point to be delivered is truly shocking. The reason for that is equally shocking. It is that it appears, we are told, that there is not agreement on the funding of that vital pension. I simply have this observation: why was the leverage of the opportunity of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) negotiations squandered? It was an opportunity to put the issue to bed. Why was the assurance not obtained that there would be funding, wherever it came from? That was the time to deliver. The victims were let down in those negotiations. Now, we are in the woeful situation that if the Executive are to negotiate with the Exchequer on the funding of the pension, the man who will go to negotiate — the Finance Minister — is a past member of the very organisation that made so many of the victims. A man who cannot even do his duty by the Quinn family will now, it seems, be asked to take forward proceedings with the Exchequer. What hope is there?

I have to ask the First Minister, Mrs Foster, what is the point in being First Minister if you cannot even deliver in this most demanding of situations? If you cannot deliver for the innocent victims of terrorism, what is the point in being First Minister? We are told that it is about finance. I wonder? I suspect that there is a party in the Executive dragging its feet on the issue, because it does not accept that the pension should be only for those who were innocent and who did not cause their own harm. Is that the real reason why there has been delay and failure to

take this forward and failure to designate a Department? I suspect that it is. However, one thing is clear: the innocent victims — just as they have been in the definition of “victim” — have been let down again. It is an appalling indictment of Government.

Mrs D Kelly: I share the concerns about the failure to put in place the structures to allow victims' pensions to be paid. Victims have campaigned long and hard for many years, and, time after time, they have been disappointed. It is over three weeks since I tabled a question for written answer to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to ask for a progress report. Can it be confirmed that there is a heading in the Budget to allow money, should it become available, to be paid over the coming months?

It is about more than just money. There were structures to put in place. I would like to hear, from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, what progress has been made on those issues. What correspondence have they had, and what meetings have they held, with the Victims' Commissioner, with those who campaigned, and with those whose lives have not changed since the day and hour that they were injured: the people who continue to struggle through the daily grind of life, suffering pain and trauma and loss?

Mr Frew: This is a very worrying time for victims; for those who suffered throughout the Troubles and for those who are suffering even in this relatively peaceful time because of their injuries and, in most cases, because of their loss. The pension, when it was announced, was a massive step forward for innocent victims. I urge the Secretary of State to stand by the legislation that was passed at Westminster to fund the pension. It is terrible that those deserving people are being let down again. I urge the Government to release the funding.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service should administer the pension, but, surely, the scheme should be funded from Westminster, as that is where the legislation was passed. Of course, innocent victims go right across the United Kingdom and the British Isles. The pension criteria apply to those who were injured through no fault of their own, and the pension was to be backdated to 23 December 2014. The legislation was in place long before the New Decade, New Approach deal, and those victims who are suffering were suffering during the years of direct rule. There is no doubt in my mind that the pensions must be administered and that the victims who have lost and have been hurt deserve this. Let us face it, for all that it is, the pension will never ever recoup the loss that they have felt.

It must be mentioned that there is a party opposite that was the political wing of the IRA, which caused so many of those victims. To hear its members speak in the media and demand that the British Government pay for their evil and for the cause, harm and pain that they dealt out to those innocent victims, is quite galling.

Mr G Kelly: I am sorry that I am late and apologies for not hearing the beginning of this. Sinn Féin's position has been for a very long time that there is a wide range of people — I agree with Paul Frew, and he is the only Member that I have heard, so forgive me for that — in the victims and survivors' community, right across the board, and they deserve this payment. I also agree with him that the pension will not compensate them for the suffering that they have gone through — not only the deaths and

the injuries that were caused, and that were caused to their families and to their extended families into another generation — but it is some acknowledgement of what they deserve. It is an acknowledgement from society that there was a conflict and that people were badly injured and continue to suffer over a long period of time. It is well past the time that they got the pension.

The pension has been agreed. I disagree with where the British Government have brought it to, in the same way that I disagree that they have not moved the Stormont House Agreement forward, because we are dealing with the pension, but we are also dealing with the wide-ranging issue of the community of victims and survivors who have suffered so much over that long period of time. To try to define it — or redefine it, as they are, of course, trying to redefine the whole issue around the structures around legacy — is the British Government's attempt to shy away from it. They are trying to be bloody-minded about where they are going with the issue, but there is a legal definition of a victim. It has been in law since 2006, and the Stormont House Agreement has been in place since 2014. My party, and I presume every other party here, has been trying to get the structures set up and to get the pension for victims moved along from the beginning.

The issue — Paul Frew pointed towards Sinn Féin — is around the British Government trying to redefine what a victim is and deciding who should and should not be one. There has been an issue around a small number of people, and I accept that there is a deep difference of opinion between unionists and republicans, but the Government have tried to spread that out to involve hundreds of people who may not be eligible for this pension. On the issue of money, which is the issue that has been in the headlines most, it is Westminster legislation: the Assembly was not set up at the time. There is an issue around the British Government and the fact — it has been said by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — that the Executive cannot afford it. I notice that the amount is £100 million. I hesitate to think that £100 million will cover this.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Kelly, I am afraid that Members were limited to three minutes each.

Mr G Kelly: I beg your pardon. I will finish with that: I think that the pension should go ahead, but it should go ahead on the basis that the British Government need to pay for it because the Executive cannot afford it.

Mr Beattie: I apologise for missing the start of this Matter of the Day and for missing most of the contributions, which I am in no doubt were extremely worthwhile.

This has been a bad week for victims: it has been a bad week for the victims' payments scheme, and it has been a bad week for the victims who are involved in the historical institutional abuse data breach.

Victims are being victimised all over again.

10.45 am

There are lots of arguments about who should and should not get this pension. I have a view on that and will give it a minute, but the big issue for me is that nobody took any action to get it set up. The lead Department was supposed to be nominated on 24 February: it was not. The board to deliver it was supposed to be set up: it was not. Nobody was telling victims that it was not on track. We asked the

Northern Ireland Office (NIO), the Executive Office and the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS), and nobody knew where it stood. It was not until about nine days before it was supposed to go live that somebody came out and said that it was not happening. That caused huge distress in the victims community, massive distress. We still do not have a lead Department and still do not have a date for when it will be set up. That is truly disgraceful. We knew that this was coming down the line.

We can have arguments here, and we will have arguments. I absolutely see where people will have a different point of view to mine on who and who should not get it. I can never stand up and say that a perpetrator is entitled to the pension. I am sure that people will understand why I am willing to say that, why I have to say that, why I will always say that: innocent victims always have to come first. I accept that other people will have different views. Let them have different views. Let them put their case across. My view will not change.

The issue about money is not a side issue, but it is not the main issue. The Executive Office did nothing in regard to this, absolutely nothing. It is shameful. They need to take the blame for this. The issue of money is so unedifying. This is a UK-wide scheme. Innocent victims in Birmingham, Manchester, London and Warrington are entitled to the payment in exactly the same way as people in Londonderry, Belfast or Armagh are entitled to it. The UK Government have to put some money in, but we also have a responsibility here in our Executive. There has to be a conversation between our Finance Minister and the Treasury. We have to pay our way; we have to put our share in. That is what is not happening. There is no conversation, and that is a disgrace.

Mr Lyttle: It was my privilege to work with victims of the Troubles with organisations such as the WAVE injured group and the victims forum during my time as Deputy Chairperson of the former Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and as a participant in the Haass/O'Sullivan talks as long ago as 2013. The Alliance Party has consistently and actively campaigned for the delivery of a pension to provide a degree of financial support, independence and recognition for those seriously injured in the Troubles. The extent to which victims have had to fight for that modest assistance is wrong. All parties signed up to this approach in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, and it is unacceptable that the pension has yet to be delivered. It must be recognised that the UK Government have a responsibility for funding the pension, given the commitments that they made during that agreement and, indeed, that the Executive Office made to its delivery. Victims have been let down for far too long, and Alliance will continue to do all that we can to ensure the prompt delivery of the pension scheme.

Mr McGrath: We also support this, because we want to see that finance and that funding making their way down to victims as quickly as possible. They have waited far too long. They have been given too many false hopes in the past, most recently in the NDNA document.

We understand that there have been difficulties for the Executive in what they have been dealing with, but the Committee for the Executive Office has continued to put pressure on to see a resolution and delivery of the scheme. We have also had cross-party agreement that the bill should be paid at Westminster. The funding needs

to come from there. Quite a sizeable amount needs to be found. As referenced earlier, we have been given a wide range for how much the scheme could cost, and it is a considerable amount. Given that the Bill to deliver the scheme originated in Westminster, it is the Committee's view that the finance should come from there. Also, the fact that many of the victims are from beyond the North — from places across the UK, Ireland and, indeed, the world — means that the funding originating here might not be fair. We certainly want to see the delivery of the scheme as quickly as possible.

Mr Nesbitt: I will speak partly informed by my experience as one of the commissioners for victims and survivors when that commission was set up in early 2007. There were four of us, and we had, at times, significantly different views on what we should do for the victims and survivors of our conflict. However, a common theme was listening to victims and survivors, and one of their common themes was that, on the day on which they or their loved ones were injured, there was an expectation that the state and the services of the state would form wagons in a circle around them and give them support. Did they need medical help? We had a health service for them. Did they need their children transported to school? We could organise that. Did they need short-term issues with cash flow addressed? We could do that. The common experience was that they were totally ignored. They were left to fend for themselves. As the years became decades and the decades passed, the common experience was a feeling that we wanted them simply to grow old, fade away and die. I think that all in the Chamber can agree that that is not what we want.

I think of someone like Jennifer McNern, who, one day in 1972, went for a drink in a Belfast city centre bar called the Abercorn and has been in a wheelchair ever since, denied, like thousands of victims and survivors, the opportunity to work for a living and save for a pension. The argument for providing that money is compelling, and I thought that we had agreed to do so. Is it a question, really, of who funds the scheme? Is it a matter of whether Treasury provides £100 million above and beyond the block grant or we take it from the Executive's Budget? Or is it about something else? Is it about who qualifies for the pension? I accept that we have a definition in the 2006 Order, but we have done plenty for people who were injured by their own hand. If somebody hurt themselves with their own gun or bomb and presented at A&E at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the NHS did not ask how they got injured and, if it was by their own hand, say, "Away you go". We have a compassionate, caring state and services, but this goes beyond that. This is about saying to people like Jennifer McNern, "We owe you", and we must find a way to do it.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for bringing the matter to the Chamber and giving me the opportunity to speak. I share the concerns about the process failing to be up and running as promised. It was supposed to launch at the end of May. The delay to the opening of the pension application is yet another harsh setback for the victims. The lack of clarity on who will fund the scheme is stalling the process again. That represents another setback for the very people whom it is for, not to mention the scheme's inclusion in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, the agreements made and the commitments given. As others have said, this is not new. The pension was agreed in 2014 and signed into legislation in January.

I echo the call of colleagues in the Chamber: we need answers from Executive Ministers, from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I urge them to attend the Chamber to take our questions and give us some solid answers. What conversations have happened with Westminster? What of the Secretary of State? What conversations have happened with the various Departments and Ministers here about the setting up of the structures? Why is no clarification being given to anybody? For years, many have said that they would do all that they could and that there was a determination to get this through: let us see it. Let us see the determination to get it sorted for the sake of victims. I expect that a quick resolution of the matter is to be found with the Executive and the Treasury. Promises were made: it is absolutely time to deliver. Otherwise, our post-conflict political system will yet again fail to assist the very people who have suffered and suffered greatly.

Mr Catney: I am ashamed, in a way, to be here debating this today. Again, I go back — I do not want to go on with you — to when I was very young and had a small public house on Donegall Quay in Belfast. In that bar, I saw every atrocity that happened, every customer who lost their mum, their dad or other loved one or was hurt, damaged or injured. When I look back, I look back not at dates but at the faces of those families. I was lucky and feel privileged to have grown up in Moira. I worked in a little bar there called the Four Trees, and I remember, among those early atrocities, there was a Sergeant Brown, God rest him, who was murdered in Rostrevor. As a young man, I found myself walking behind that coffin, and so many more have I walked behind since.

Folks, I do not care where this comes from. We need to get a solution, and the victims need to be paid. No more crocodile tears, and no more playing politics. Just do the right thing. My colleague Mike mentioned the bomb in the Abercorn; no one of my vintage could forget that. There are all these tragedies, whether it is a father, mother, brother or sister locking up a pub, a business or a shop late at night and being assassinated simply because they chose to do something else in their spare time or to try the best they could to bring the community together. Folks, we are making great progress. This needs to be launched. It needs to be delivered, and it needs to be delivered now.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As no other Member has risen in their place and indicated that they wish to speak, we will move on.

Committee Business

Committee Membership

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As with other similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Patsy McGlone replace Mr Pat Catney as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs; and that Ms Sinead Bradley replace Mr Patsy McGlone as a member of the Committee for Justice. — [Mr McGrath.]

Ministerial Statement

COVID-19 Response

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Infrastructure that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, I have relaxed the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they want to ask a question. Members do still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, but they can do this by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Table here directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question to the Minister. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be allowed.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to update Members on the ways in which my Department is responding to the coronavirus pandemic.

We have now entered our ninth week of restrictions on the ways in which we all previously lived. Those restrictions have imposed significant challenges on our family life, our communities and our economy, but they have saved lives. It is crucial that representatives and the public know that their actions have protected our health service, slowed the spread of this deadly virus and protected our families and our communities.

The people of Northern Ireland and the politicians in Northern Ireland, for the first time in a very long time, have all come together, showing that, when we work together, we can take steps forward even in times of crisis and unprecedented change. As we start to take early, tentative steps towards recovery, maybe seeing relatives and friends outdoors for the first time in months, it is important for us to remember why we must continue our resolve in our fight against coronavirus.

It is so important that we do not act in any way that could undermine the huge sacrifices that we have all made so far.

11.00 am

As your Minister for Infrastructure, it is my responsibility to play my part in our fight against COVID-19 and in our road map to recovery. Members will know that my Department has worked tirelessly throughout this period to find solutions to the countless challenges that the crisis has produced. I am delighted to say that today I can announce further progress that will assist citizens across the North.

One of the challenges that has proven more complex to resolve during the crisis is the issuing of driving licences for people requiring medicals. I am pleased to say that a solution is now imminent. As I announced earlier, a new EU regulation will become law in the coming days that means that driving licences with an expiry date of between 1 February and 31 August 2020 will be treated as being valid for a further seven months. That extension will automatically apply to all driving licences expiring during the period. For some lorry and bus drivers, it will remove the requirement to have a medical assessment conducted at this difficult time. It will also help any customers who could not access the website or were finding it difficult to renew their driving licence online. The extension will

also allow the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) to start processing provisional driving licences again. Road safety is my key priority. I therefore remind all drivers that they have a responsibility to notify the DVA if they have a new or worsening medical condition or disability that may affect their ability to drive.

I very much regret that, as taxi driver licences are not covered by the EU driving licence directive, the extension provisions cannot be applied to them. For those taxi drivers who do not have a medical condition to declare, however, my Department will renew their five-year taxi driver licence without a medical report, although they may be asked to submit a medical report at some future date. For those with a medical condition, I will do everything in my power to ensure that they are prioritised for medical appointments and licence renewal. I know that that will be a welcome reassurance for many drivers, as many Members have contacted me over their constituents' concerns. I am grateful to my team in the DVA and across the Department, who have worked to find solutions that will help many drivers here.

I am also well aware that the continued suspension of vehicle-testing services has caused significant inconvenience for those customers who require certification for specialist vehicles and where a temporary exemption certificate is not applicable. I have listened to representatives from the freight and manufacturing industries. Given the impact that the suspension has had on business and on the delivery of essential services, I am pleased to confirm that, from 1 June, the DVA will introduce a statutory authorisation process that will permit the continued use of ADR vehicles on our roads, provided strict conditions and control measures are in place for those heavy vehicles.

I can also advise that proposals to reinstate individual vehicle approval (IVA) testing safely from 1 June are at an advanced stage. Following consultation with staff and unions, a risk-assessed process has been agreed, in line with social-distancing guidance, to ensure that my staff and our customers are protected during the testing process.

I am committed to ensuring that staff in the DVA — indeed, staff from across my Department — feel safe and supported as they return to delivering essential services. As part of my ongoing commitment, I have said that engagement must continue with the unions to ensure that, as we move forward, we do so together, supporting and protecting workers as they work to protect customers and deliver services. Comprehensive advice and guidance on all those positive steps will issue to customers shortly and will be available on the nidirect website. I know that a number of other DVA services have been suspended. I can assure Members that each will be considered, risk-assessed and resumed as soon as it is safe to do so.

The focus of my Department's work has been on finding creative solutions to problems arising from COVID-19. I am proud that my team has been able to deliver so much over the past number of months. On roads, we have focused on emergency repair work. We are now in stage 1 of the Executive's recovery process, however, so it is appropriate to extend the works carried out by my Department to the maintenance of public roads. As our internal and external contractors have come to grips with new ways of working that allow staff and the public to be safe when

works are carried out, confidence has built to an extent that resurfacing and surface-dressing programmes and minor capital work schemes are being taken forward. That decision was not taken lightly and involved discussions with the industry and trade unions, as well as with officials on the engineering and the health and safety sides. However, let me be clear: the works will be allowed only if the contractors involved provide evidence that the risks have been properly assessed and addressed and that mitigation measures such as compliance with social-distancing requirements and the provision of appropriate PPE can be met and are adhered to.

I am committed to moving forward when and where we can, but, to do that, I must be absolutely assured that health and safety is protected. As Members will be aware, the Department for Infrastructure is vital to our recovery. Our work in running water, public transport and road services will underpin our economic recovery and development. That was true before COVID, but now it is even more fundamental. As a Government — indeed, as an Assembly — and as a society, we need to invest in infrastructure if we are to build our way into the new normal; developing a new world that supports growth and seizes the opportunity for real change.

Change will be easy, at times, and, at others, much more difficult. As we look to recovery, there will be difficult decisions for the Executive and for Ministers. The stark reality is that resources are low and the job of Government is to make decisions that will best protect our communities. That means being open, honest and transparent. I want to advise Members that it is no secret that my Department faces significant budgetary challenges; those I have inherited and new pressures from loss of income due to COVID-19. I welcome the Executive's commitment to supporting public transport and their allocation to my Department of £30 million towards helping to address the funding pressures. However, I must be honest with the Assembly that I am growing increasingly concerned that, to date, we have not seen the same recognition and understanding of the funding crisis that NI Water is experiencing as a direct result of COVID-19.

Members, the public and businesses expect Northern Ireland Water to look after our health and well-being through access to clean water and proper sanitation. Likewise, Northern Ireland Water, as a publicly-owned company, is rightly looking to the Executive to provide the essential funding that it needs to replace the lost income and increased costs of the current pandemic. Going forward, whether it is about washing our hands, building more homes or helping businesses to restart, Northern Ireland Water is fundamental, and I hope that the Assembly, across all parties, will support me in ensuring that resources are directed to protect our communities and economy as we look to recovery.

While investment in infrastructure means that we get the basics right — we can protect our water system and our public transport network and keep the lights on and our roads safe — it is through infrastructure that we can also transform our communities, improving lives and making Northern Ireland an attractive place to live, to visit, to work and to start a business. It is time for us all to start thinking bigger and bolder.

I fully acknowledge that lockdown has been challenging and that many people have been waiting and longing for

things to return to normal, but, in looking back, we need to consider the best of what "normal" entailed and what we have learnt over past months and to imagine and plan for a better, greener, healthier and happier future. I have said it before, and I will say it again: we need to seize the chance for change. For that reason, I also want to provide you with some further detail on how my Department and I will lead a green recovery.

Since social-distancing measures and lockdown were introduced, air pollution across all of Europe has dropped measurably. Northern Ireland is no different. Transport is the second-biggest contributor to greenhouse gases here, and, with far less traffic on the roads, the benefits to our environment have been immediate and significant. However, the reality is that, as more of us move back to our workplaces and get out and about, our traffic volumes will increase again.

In my last statement to the Assembly, I announced that I would be creating, in my Department, a walking and cycling champion to spearhead delivery of our commitment to increasing the percentage of journeys made by walking and cycling. I have invited stakeholders to join an advisory group to help the champion to identify opportunities so that we can move quickly in making changes on the ground. I want to build real momentum, and we are seeing progress. Some of the interventions that are being trialled and tested may only be needed for a short time, but, in the longer term, I will consider permanent changes to our streetscapes that will transform how our town centres facilitate walking and cycling. Above all, I am determined to make changes that will underpin a green recovery and improve public health.

While I am focused on the prize of a sustainable future, one immediate need is helping people with social distancing in our city and town centres. As a result, my Department is taking forward pilot schemes in Belfast, Derry and Newry. In Belfast, Hill Street and Gordon Street in the Cathedral Quarter have been pedestrianised and footpaths have been widened across the Linen Quarter. In Derry, I will provide extra space for people along the riverfront and I will work with the council and other stakeholders to bring forward plans for reducing traffic within the city walls as businesses begin to reopen. We are also working in partnership with Newry, Mourne and Down District Council on innovative solutions in Newry. Initially, changes will be made with cones and temporary barriers. If something does not work, I will remove it and try something else. My Department will be flexible and responsive but it will not be afraid to try new approaches.

I am grateful for the support and can-do attitude and approach of the three councils that my officials have been working with so far to bring early ideas to fruition. It is so important that, in partnership, we learn from each other as we navigate our way through these unprecedented times to deliver for all our citizens. As well as creating a number of pop-up cycle lanes, my Department is looking at ways in which we can support communities, particularly those in disadvantaged inner city communities, that do not have easy access to space for recreation and leisure.

I have no interest in imposing change from on high. Councils, local businesses and communities know what will work best in their locality and change will only last if we work in partnership. That is my commitment and my approach. However, that is only one example of

how my Department is helping to shape our recovery. In conversations with business, the green sector and other stakeholders, the understanding that infrastructure spending will be crucial in restarting the economy is reiterated time and time again.

In the wake of COVID, but also with the looming disaster of Brexit that faces these islands, we all need to roll up our sleeves. We must now get to grips with the serious pressures. That means working together; it means working inside and outside government, across the public and private sectors and across these islands. We need to be willing partners and ambitious leaders. This is our chance for change — our opportunity to show that leadership in the Assembly and in the Executive can deliver for our citizens and our communities.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for making her statement to the House. Before I call the Chair of the Infrastructure Committee to ask her question, I remind Members that this is not a meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Response to COVID-19. Therefore, it is established in Standing Orders that questions on the statement will be given an hour; they will not be given an hour and 15 minutes. Members must be succinct and ask their questions directly, and Ministers must be succinct in their answers also.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the content of the Minister's statement and, in particular, the extension for driving licence renewals and the resumption of IVA testing. However, I was disappointed to hear from the Finance Minister last week when he informed us that discussions on support for hauliers concluded that an intervention was not necessary and also that no package for the taxi industry had been presented to him for consideration. I would be interested to hear from the Minister for Infrastructure on those issues.

The Finance Minister also reiterated that furloughing staff was up to individual Ministers and not the Executive. Given the budgetary pressures across the Department, including those on Northern Ireland Water, which were highlighted in the statement, may I ask the Minister for clarity: at what point, if any, during this crisis did she or her officials ask Translink, DVA and community transport to explore the possibility of furloughing staff? In hindsight, was there more that she or her officials could have done to lessen the financial pressures that are being felt in those areas of business?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Chair for her question. DAERA leads on the issue of the hauliers, and my Department has been working with a cross-departmental group of officials to make a case to DfT and to the Treasury.

The Finance Minister is correct: at this time, it is Treasury's assessment that there is not sufficient evidence to bring forward a financial package for our haulage industry. However, I assure the Member that my officials will continue to do all that they can, working with DAERA and the Department for the Economy, because we recognise the critical role that our hauliers are playing during the crisis.

11.15 am

The Chair of the Committee will be aware of the number of items of correspondence that I have sent to Executive colleagues on the need to provide support for our taxi

industry. That support is outwith my Department's responsibility as we are responsible for regulation.

The Chair also asked about furloughing. At the request of the Finance Minister, my Department carried out a detailed analysis on the potential furloughing of Translink and Northern Ireland Water staff. We presented that analysis to the Finance Minister. He has not come back to raise additional concerns, so I assume that he accepts that analysis. Ministers are responsible for looking at the furloughing of their arm's-length bodies. It is my understanding, however, that responsibility for the furloughing of Northern Ireland Civil Service staff lies with the Finance Minister. As Minister for Infrastructure, I cannot alter the terms and conditions of individual civil servants within my Department.

I can assure the Chair that I am aware of the difficult financial situation. I made a number of bids to the Executive, but only one has been accepted, which was the £30 million for Translink out of the £95 million that was sitting centrally. Some of that money has gone to our ferries and airports. We are, therefore, doing everything that we can within my Department. However, the reality is that the financial situation that was facing the Department for Infrastructure prior to COVID was deeply concerning, and that has been compounded by the COVID crisis.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. We are supportive of exploring ways to build sustainable infrastructure — that is very much welcomed — but concerns have been raised by businesses and people in the community about the removal of parking spaces. It is something that I have raised with the Minister in the past number of days. The Minister mentioned the importance of not imposing change in areas when going through this, but there has been confusion, particularly around the plans for the city centre of Newry in my constituency. Over the past few days, it has come to my attention that local businesses were informed at pretty much the last minute of plans to start work yesterday. That work has been halted, and I welcome that. There needs to be proper and meaningful consultation with those businesses and key stakeholders, as you mentioned in your statement. That is important. They know the locality best, and they know what will work well for them. Will the Minister elaborate on her plans to engage with those stakeholders? There seems to be conflicting statements, even from her colleagues in the area, about whether the work is due to start or what is happening. It is important, because we want to do this right. It has to be done with the people and not to the people.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She is absolutely right: it is important that we do this and that we do it together. The Member will know that I established the active travel champion, who is leading on the consultation, and she may know that, this week, I am due to meet the council group leaders to discuss plans.

My Department has been working with the councils, but I have been clear that while my Department can provide the drive and impetus, it is not best placed to provide the detail. Local communities know what will work best. I am clear that things have to be done in consultation with local councils and the partners within the council area. I am also clear that I am not imposing change from the top down. I became aware of the confusion in Newry, over the weekend. I assure the Member that I have not signed off on any plans.

As we go through this, it is important that we understand how that confusion arose and that we learn from that to ensure that it does not happen in Newry, or in any council area in the North. I want to reassure the Member that I am committed to partnership working, to pursuing the active travel agenda and to tackling regional imbalances. I look forward to working with her and others as we deliver the change that will work.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for her statement and for the work and leadership shown within the Department during these difficult times. I have been contacted by many in the community transport sector who do fantastic work for many of the most vulnerable in our community. Will the Minister give some assurances to the community transport operators over funding support as she looks forward to her budget?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise the vital role that community transport plays, particularly in rural areas. I am keen to support the community transport sector in the redeployment of its services to help some of the most vulnerable during the COVID crisis. It has made a tremendous contribution, and I put that on record.

My officials sent letters to the community transport sector about an interim quarterly payment. That was to provide some sense of reassurance and certainty, at a time of great uncertainty, while I finalise budget allocations.

I reiterate that I recognise the importance of community transport. It has demonstrated that over and beyond, in its response to the COVID crisis. I am committed to supporting it.

Mr Beggs: The Minister spoke of the need for a green recovery. Some capital infrastructure projects can reduce congestion in the middle of Belfast city centre, improve the air quality, create construction jobs and improve the efficiency of the whole Northern Ireland economy. Will the Minister provide an update of the progress of the Yorkgate/ York Street interchange, which will bring many benefits at different levels? It is important that it progresses.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. There is a danger of falling into a false dichotomy, where you are either for active travel or for investment in our road network. I recognise that this is all part of getting us to the right place. York Street is an Executive commitment. It was subject to legal challenge, which has put back the project, but it will bring multiple benefits as the Member outlined.

Mr Muir: Research issued yesterday showed that 56% of commuters with a driving licence, who used public transport prior to the pandemic, are considering buying a car and using it as a means of transport. That is a matter of real concern. In England, a scheme has been announced where you get a £50 voucher to cover the cost of repair of a bicycle. Is that something the Minister is considering introducing? Also, when is the capital going to be released for greenway funding?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He points to an issue of great concern. Given the robustness of the messaging to people, to stay at home and engage only in essential travel, we have a real issue when it comes to restoring public confidence and encouraging people to come back to use public transport in safety. The Member will be aware that Translink has implemented a number of measures, including protective screens, deep cleaning and

a range of policies and procedures to protect people in the use of public transport.

I have set up the walking and cycling champion. She has been tasked, along with the steering group, with looking at a range of measures that have worked right across the board. One of the issues that they will be examining is that of the voucher scheme that the Member has raised.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her statement, which is fairly positive. Looking at the active travel element, we discussed these matters with our super cities, Londonderry, Belfast and Newry. Will the Minister give assurance that these schemes will also be rolled out to other provincial towns?

Ms Mallon: I give the Member that assurance. Initial engagement gathered momentum around the cities of Belfast, Derry and Newry, but that is not to the exclusion of other areas. This will work only if we are able to roll it out, so I am committed to engaging with councils across the North, and with communities and businesses, so that we can see the active travel agenda pursued and implemented right across Northern Ireland.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for her statement. As you know, your Department has received the highest amount of capital spending that it has ever done, and I am conscious that there have been nine years of austerity. In your statement, you talk about road safety, regional inequalities and connectivity. Can you assure me, the people of Derry and those of the north-west, that you are fully committed to the two flagship projects, the A5 and A6, and that they will continue to progress under your watch?

Ms Mallon: As the Member knows, I am committed to regional development and to the continued progression of the A5 and A6. The succinct answer to your question is yes.

Ms Bunting: I welcome the Minister's statement. I declare my membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Over the past number of years, we have seen a steep decline in the number of taxis that there are to service the community, including a very low number that are equipped for wheelchair users. That is now coupled with a significant increase in drink-driving during the lockdown period. I am grateful for the Minister's movement on medicals and the extension of licences, and I note her answer to the Committee Chair, but what is the state of progress between her, the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance to assist that key sector?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. On the issue of taxis, I assume that she is talking about financial support for the sector. She is not on the Committee, but the Committee had requested evidence of what I have been doing to try to raise that matter. In March, I think, I wrote to both the Economy Minister and the Finance Minister. The sector has been hard hit. We need to understand how we can assist it. There is also the outstanding issue of social guidance. I have been in correspondence with the Economy Minister on that.

I am very clear that I recognise that the industry needs support. I am also very clear that I want to work with all Executive colleagues to ensure that taxi drivers get support. However, there is also a number of sole traders who find themselves in a similar situation who have not been able to avail themselves of the hardship or financial support schemes that have come through from the

Department for the Economy. On that and on all matters, I am keen to work with Executive colleagues. Given that we have different roles, responsibilities and remits covering that particular issue, it is only when we work together that we can address it within the financial difficulties that we all currently face.

I recognise the issue of disability access to taxis. I have looked to see what is being done in the Republic of Ireland, for example. The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) sits on my steering committee on efforts on the walking and cycling champion. IMTAC is very clear that that is a particular issue. I would like to see more being done in my Department and across the Executive on disability access and the rights of the disabled community.

Ms Ennis: The Minister's statement talks about recovery and how she can play her part in that. I suggest to her that one very obvious way in which she could play her part would be to finally make a decision on Casement Park. It is a vital project, which has Executive approval. It would play a significant role in the economic recovery. When will she finally give clarity and make a decision on Casement Park?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. It gives me an important opportunity to establish the facts. The Member will be aware that my Department is working at pace to process that application so that it can be brought as quickly as possible to me. That is a statutory process which must be completed before it comes up for a decision. I am sure that no Member or anyone who has any interest in any planning application that is before my Department would want due process not to be followed.

On that application, I am advised that my Department anticipates that all necessary responses will be received soon, and that officials can make a recommendation to me. I know that it is a long-awaited decision. After three years of no Government, it is important that progress is made across the board for communities and economic recovery, particularly as we look to the future beyond the pandemic.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is very encouraging indeed. Going forward, are there any projects in the Department that might be able to be rolled out quicker that would generate capital spend and could jump-start or boot the economy as it comes out of the crisis?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. A number of Executive capital projects are referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Work is continuing on the A5 and A6. Work has commenced on the transport hub. It is recognised right across the world that infrastructure and the investment in infrastructure that the Member has pointed out will be the bedrock of recovery. We face a very difficult and serious recession. Evidence from around the world shows that we need to build our way out of that recession. That is why I am keen that my Department plays its fullest role. Working with Executive colleagues, we can envisage investment in infrastructure, and we can try to do exactly that: build our way out of the incoming recession.

11.30 am

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister made reference to individual vehicle approval tests being resumed. Can she clarify whether that will happen on 1 June or whether it remains, to some extent, a work in progress? When it does resume,

will the prioritisation of vehicles that deliver essential services include bin lorries?

Ms Mallon: I can assure the Member that IVA testing will resume on 1 June and that, because we recognise the critical role that key workers are playing, there will be a prioritisation process and it does include our bin lorries. Yes, it will commence on 1 June and there will be a prioritisation process.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the measures. However, she did indicate that the taxi industry may lose out on driving licensing in some cases. Will the Minister commit to looking at other ways of licensing, such as discounting the cost of renewals, which is over £100, given the heavy burden that taxi drivers are under at the minute?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will know that we have issued, free of charge, the six-month extension to PSVs. Taxi drivers without a medical condition to declare will now automatically get a five-year extension when they apply. Some may be asked within that to provide a medical assessment. There is a difficulty that it is proving enormously complex to resolve, and that is for those drivers who have a medical condition that they must declare. In all these things, I have to try to balance finding the solution while recognising that I have a duty to ensure road safety for taxi drivers and their passengers.

The Member will know that I announced that we were working in partnership with the BMA and GPs to ensure that those taxi drivers and key workers who need to have a medical assessment can get that. That is working in many places, and I want to put on record my appreciation. There are still some difficulties for those requiring specialist medical assessments because of the strain on our health service. However, I have set up a dedicated email address for taxi drivers who find themselves in this situation, and that will be fully available on nidirect. I am very conscious that it is difficult for the group of drivers who require further specialist medical attention and assessment, but I will continue to do all that I can to find a practical resolution that does not compromise their road safety.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the Minister's appointment of a walking and cycling champion and action on the long overdue pedestrianisation of the Cathedral Quarter. The Minister is talking about big and bold actions and supporting inner-city communities to access clean and active travel. What investment will be made in walking and cycling? Will that include the delivery of a toucan walking and cycling crossing to link the Braniel estate to the Connswater Community Greenway, investment in on-road cycle training for children and adults and greater access to trains and buses for cyclists?

Ms Mallon: Again, I thank the Member for his question and his passion for this subject. I am not in a position to be able to highlight specific projects and the projects that he named. However, I can assure him that we are working through budget allocations to put force behind this, if you like. I am very cognisant of the fact that you can do all that you can to promote walking and cycling but if you do not facilitate safe spaces in which to do so, people will not be able to engage in those activities. I can assure him that we are working, led by the walking and cycling champion, with people from right across society who are on the steering

group and also with the local councils. Very soon, I hope to be in a position where we are able to confirm the specifics of the projects that will be taken forward in conjunction with the councils.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her statement and answers thus far. The Minister referred to building our way out of the recession that is coming towards us. Will the Minister commit today to bringing forward legislation to extend planning permission for those individuals and groups whose permission is now running to an end? My colleague Liz Kimmins raised this issue on several occasions with her, but, to date, we have not had a commitment to bring the legislation forward. The Minister will note, for instance, that the Communities Minister has been able to bring legislation through the House quite quickly. The House can give consent to speedy legislation when necessary.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is an issue that I have been very conscious of. It is very difficult to quantify the extent of the problem of expiring planning permission. I have tasked officials to do that but they are saying that it is very difficult to assess how many have had works commenced and how many have not. That is not to say that it is not an issue. The Member will know that I have said that we were exploring legislative options because primary legislative change is required in this instance. There had been discussions that the Executive would bring forward a Coronavirus Bill, and we had hoped to place this piece of legislation within that, but I am still exploring a piece of individual legislation. I am trying to weigh up, as construction works recommence, what is the best and most efficient and effective solution for people, but I can assure the Member that I have not taken the legislation option off the agenda. We are assessing it and we will continue to assess it. In the interim, we have provided advice. The chief planner sent out correspondence to all the councils. The option exists that people could renew planning permission at a much-reduced fee, but that is not ideal. There is now the added option of having commencement works started, given that we are seeing easements around construction work.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for the update. She talked about the difficulties that are facing Northern Ireland Water. Can she spell out, in a bit more detail, what it will mean for communities, including building, if we do not get more funding for Northern Ireland Water?

With regard to the development of Casement Park, Ulster GAA fans and others who are interested in that development will want to ensure that the process is done properly so that there are no more challenges. It is pointless to try to push through a speedy decision that will result in the development either falling through or there being more objections. Can the Minister confirm that, please?

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that — and I hope that this will be the case across the board, regardless of party politics and point-scoring — every application should be assessed and should follow due process. My job, as Minister for Infrastructure, is to do my job right, not to rush it, and I am committed to doing that.

The Member will know that Northern Ireland Water provides vital public services across Northern Ireland. Ensuring that it is financially supported is not only fundamental to Northern Ireland Water's future but

critical for protecting our communities. It is important to point out the facts. First, businesses have closed, due to the COVID-19 restrictions, leading to a funding gap in Northern Ireland Water of £30 million. Secondly, despite the fall in business use, demand for water has increased overall during lockdown, as we are using more water at home. Sewer blockages have also increased, with more wet wipes being flushed down drains, and Northern Ireland Water has had to adapt working practices to keep its front-line staff safe. All of that means that it is incurring extra costs. Thirdly, Northern Ireland Water is a regulated utility, with a delivery plan that has been carefully and independently scrutinised by the Utility Regulator. It is required to deliver a challenging efficiency programme, which it has done and continues to do. Fourthly, Northern Ireland Water cannot access any of the COVID-19 business support mechanisms for rate relief or loans that are available to the private sector. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, Northern Ireland Water provides the most vital of services to our population, providing clean drinking water, taking away and treating waste water and protecting our health at the very time that we need it most. How anyone can defend not providing Northern Ireland Water with the support that it needs baffles me. The fact is that if we do not invest in our water and waste water infrastructure, we will not be able to build the homes that we need, we will not be able to grow our economy and we will not be able to properly recover from this crisis.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for her statement. She talked about looking forward to economic recovery etc and, obviously, that would include capital projects. There are a number of projects that I have heard spoken about, particularly in the east of the Province. What plans does she have to bring forward some of the projects in the west, particularly the south-west, such as the Enniskillen bypass?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I recognise that it is an important project and the Member has raised it with me a couple of times. Yes, we are in the process of finalising the capital projects that we intend to bring forward. I hope to be in a position, very soon, to update the Committee, and Members across the House, on those decisions.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her responses today and for her, and her Department's, response to the crisis that has engulfed us. I commend the Minister on not only her response to the crisis but her vision in looking beyond the crisis, particularly in the sphere of active travel. I was excited to learn of the Minister's proposals for her active travel plans for Derry city, which is in my constituency. Can she outline some of those, which I am hopeful will include the commencement of the Strathfoyle greenway in the future?

Ms Mallon: The Member never misses an opportunity to talk about this particular greenway. Yes, I have announced that we are looking at works on pedestrianising and widening streets around the riverfront. We are also working with the council to identify other opportunities for change. Again, this week coming, I am engaging with the group leaders across Derry city council, because I think that it is very important, which I spoke about earlier, that we do these things in partnership. There is no point in me coming into areas and imposing change; I need to be working with local councils, businesses and communities to understand what will work best in their locality, and that

is what I am committed to doing not only in Derry but right across Northern Ireland.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her statement, particularly the ongoing recognition of the need for a green recovery and a just transition. If councils are not involved in doing the work or piloting projects now on the reallocation of road space, how can communities that want to look at specific areas in their town and village communicate that to the Department?

Ms Mallon: I encourage them to contact the Department directly. They can contact the walking and cycling champion. Alternatively, they can come through Members to my private office or directly to me via my private office at the Department for Infrastructure.

Mr Allister: Can I take the Minister back to the lack of financial support for the haulage sector? I heard what she said to the Chair of the Committee, which was to the effect that the Department for Transport and the Treasury said that there was no need for support. In fact, last week in the Chamber, when I asked the Finance Minister about this, he said:

"I know that part of the transportation money that we had been holding back was in anticipation of a request in that area. That did not emerge, and we went ahead, then, with the allocation to Translink." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 128, p151, col 1].

That is very different from saying that the Treasury decided that there was not funds. That is the Minister of Finance saying that there was a pot of transportation money sitting in his Department, awaiting an application to support the haulage industry, but that it did not come and the money instead went to Translink. Is that correct? If so, why was the haulage sector neglected?

If I might, in her pursuit of green energy, will the Minister undertake to visit and meet Wrightbus to discover the exciting plans that it has for hydrogen buses, which, of course, Translink could greatly benefit from?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will know that my Department has been working closely with DAERA and the Department for the Economy on hauliers. The Member may also be aware that £95 million came across and was being held centrally for a transport package. From that £95 million has come the support package for the ferries and the support package for the airports. Translink was allocated £30 million, but £59 million is being retained in the centre for that transport package.

I can advise Members only on what I know. I understand very clearly that we have been trying to make the case for our haulage industry, and we have been working with the industry in providing the evidence for that. We have been informed by the Treasury, in our engagement with the devolved Ministers and DfT, that the analysis undertaken by the Treasury is indicating to it that, at this moment in time, there is not the evidential base for a financial support package. I can report only on what I know.

As regards his invitation, I am happy to meet anyone to advance the green recovery agenda.

Mr Carroll: The Minister mentioned the importance of listening. I agree with her about that, and I urge her Department, her as a Minister and other Ministers to listen

to the concerns of residents in the Casement Park area, especially about overdevelopment.

I have raised previously with the Minister how Belfast Roads Service workers, despite raising it several times with the Department, do not have appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). I urge the Minister to intervene — it is an ongoing problem — to ensure that those workers who are working on roads, gullies and other works have protective equipment.

Given that they are ongoing concerns, what assurances will the Minister give us that, as her Department moves towards recommencing minor capital works, the workers who carry out that work will be protected and will have appropriate equipment?

11.45 am

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for raising that important issue. The continuation of construction works is in line with current government advice that businesses should encourage their employees to work at home where possible, while accepting that certain jobs require people to travel to their place of work. While construction work was never included in the list of activities subject to closure or restrictions, it has been necessary to develop new, safe systems of working and to invest in additional PPE to allow various operations to be carried out safely. Because of that, I was only prepared initially to allow my Department's internal contractor to carry out emergency work. However, as additional PPE was procured and safe working systems were developed, in consultation with trade unions, I have allowed additional road maintenance and flood alleviation work to proceed, including a wide range of road maintenance operations and watercourse maintenance.

In addition to allowing our private contractors to complete work that had already been started or ordered, I have permitted new road surfacing, surface dressing and minor works to proceed. However, as I made clear in my statement, works will proceed only if there are guarantees and assurances that workers are being kept safe. I make it clear also that, if that is not the case, I need to be made aware of it immediately. I have asked officials for very regular updates on the provision of PPE for workers from Translink, Northern Ireland Water and right across my Department. I have also made it clear that, with the ongoing engagement with workers and trades unions, I want to be made aware of any safety concerns that workers have raised that have not been addressed.

Mr K Buchanan: My question relates to existing DVA services, to which the Minister referred. What is the state of readiness of MOT centres to open when it will be safe to do so? I appreciate that they are doing other work at present, but will they be fit to operate when it is safe to do so?

Ms Mallon: The Member will know that we initially said that we were suspending the DVA testing services until 22 June. I am keeping that under review. I am clear that, when it is safe to do so, we will reopen the centres and will do so in consultation with workers and trade unions. As a member of the Committee, he will also know that the installation programme for the new lifts has commenced and is due to be completed in July, and that will greatly assist with the situation. That is aside from the three centres that are being used as COVID testing centres, and I have made it clear to the Health Minister that, if

he requires any additional MOT centres as we roll out community testing, he will have priority use.

To reassure the Member, I am very conscious of public health advice and, obviously, of the Executive's pathway to recovery, and I will make my decisions in line with all of that.

Mr McNulty: Minister, you referred to getting things done when politicians work together. Is it not a terrible shame that Casement Park did not get over the line when Sinn Féin held the Ministry and was held back for a further three years by the collapse of Stormont? Given that investment in infrastructure will be key to economic recovery, what discussions, if any, have the Ministers for the Economy and Finance had with you to plan for economic recovery?

Ms Mallon: I think that there is frustration across the board in Northern Ireland about the missed opportunities and what could have been advanced in the three years when we were without a Government. I have clear about the role of infrastructure and the importance of infrastructure investment not only in the green recovery but in building us out of recession. I will continue to make that case with Executive colleagues.

I acknowledge that we are in difficult financial times. Every Department is struggling with inescapable pressures, but, as an Executive, we have a duty to support and protect our private sector. We also have a duty and responsibility to protect our critical public services — public transport and Northern Ireland Water — so I will continue to engage with Executive colleagues, because it is in all of our interests to ensure that we protect those critical public services.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you will be well aware of the delay in many works across your Department due to COVID-19. As we start to move towards normality, will the Minister commit to working with me to help residents of uncompleted developments across Northern Ireland — I think that there are three that stretch back as far as the financial crash — who have not had their roads tarmacked or their water mains connected due to mishaps with the developer and NI Water? Will you commit to working with me on Birchwood Manor, in particular, to see the completion of those developments and allow those residents to live in peace?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that it is a complex issue. There is the issue of unadopted roads and the legal ramifications as regards what my Department can do. However, I am keen to work with all Members. I am happy to meet you — via Zoom, given the current circumstances — to see what we can do, working together.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank Members for the succinctness of their questions and the Minister for the succinctness of her answers. It is all done in 36 minutes, so well done.

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates Further Vote on Account 2020-2021

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £8,225,189,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £9,050,940,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 1, and column 4 of table 2, in the Northern Ireland Estimates Further Vote on Account 2020-2021 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 May 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed up to four hours for the debate. The Minister will have 30 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and winding. The Chair of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes.

Mr Murphy: This debate covers the Supply resolution for a further Vote on Account for the 2020-21 financial year. The associated document was laid in the Assembly on 20 May. I would like to explain to the Assembly why I am taking the unusual step of laying a second Vote on Account. The Budget Act (NI) 2020, passed by the Assembly in the March, included a Vote on Account that allowed Departments to continue to spend until Main Estimates could be considered in June. However, the response to COVID-19 has meant that some Departments have had to spend more than anticipated. The Executive have allocated an additional £1.2 billion as part of our response to COVID-19. In addition, many Departments have been front-loading payments in an effort to support business and community groups that rely on government spending.

Our analysis suggests that at least five Departments may run out of cash before 31 July 2020, the date when a Budget Bill would normally be expected to receive Royal Assent. One Department may reach that limit as early as 19 June. If we were to follow the usual process, Departments would run out of cash before the Estimates document was approved. Having examined the options, I advise that the only viable solution is the Assembly's approval of a further Vote on Account. That will provide authority for Departments to continue to spend until the detailed Main Estimates can be debated later in the year. I plan to bring forward those Main Estimates in the autumn, when the financial position will hopefully be more stable.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and his explanation of why it is necessary for the House to consider, in these extraordinary circumstances, a further Vote on Account. One of the key priorities for the Committee since the resumption of normal business has been to engage regularly with the Department on the financial landscape in Northern Ireland, first, to effectively scrutinise the Department's own resource needs and, secondly, to consider the Department's wider strategic role in coordinating financial resources across government. We particularly welcome the Minister's approach and that of the Executive. We wait expectantly to hear of the economic recovery plan for the Minister for the Economy, which is now, I think, about two weeks overdue. That engagement, along with the responsiveness of the Department in supporting the Committee's approach, has been useful in helping the Committee to develop an effective working relationship. We look forward to nurturing that important and necessary relationship further so that the Committee can continue to provide advice and assistance to the Department effectively and scrutinise and challenge as required. By developing that approach, the Committee has been kept informed of the necessity for the business that we debate today. I express my thanks on behalf of the Committee to all the officials who have been in attendance or made use of teleconferencing facilities over recent weeks to facilitate the Committee's business by responding to the many and varied issues that have been raised with them not just by the Committee of Finance but by most of the Statutory Committees.

We are all acutely aware that much has changed in a very short time frame — in fact, change seems to be the only constant — but those changes have been necessary to keep us safe and support business and workers. We still have much to do to respond to the matters that are within our control by ensuring that Departments have the necessary resources available to them at the point of need. As has already been outlined, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in Departments incurring significant spending that was unforeseen at the time of the previous Vote on Account; indeed, some Departments are already reaching their limits. Therefore, in order to alleviate the risk of Departments running out of money, we in the House must use our judgement for the continued well-being of our society.

As I alluded to earlier, officials from the Department were in attendance at our meetings last week to brief the Committee on the resource requirements across all Departments. During the evidence session, the Committee examined the reconciliation between the required resource limits against the Budget document and the associated COVID-19 allocations to understand how those sums were calculated and how the allocations were made. Members sought and received assurances from officials that, as a result of this Vote on Account, Departments would be sufficiently resourced until the Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill are produced. Those are expected in September.

The Committee also heard that many payments to suppliers, the voluntary and community sector and other organisations were being front-loaded to earlier in the financial year to provide necessary support to those sectors, which we welcome. However, I also urge a degree of caution and an element of control to safeguard and ensure that there is a balance between the support

required and the risk of a supplier being unable to fulfil its contracted services or functions for the remainder of the financial year, when no further payments would be due.

Committee Members also explored with officials the opportunities that may exist for the Executive to use reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing to provide other means of reigniting our economy. In response, officials helpfully provided clarification that such borrowing is drawn from the National Loans Fund, may be used only for capital expenditure and allows borrowing of up to £200 million. Until the true effects of this chapter in our history are fully known, we must continue to explore every option and every available resource to help us achieve our goals. We need to be innovative in our approach and maximise every possible avenue to ensure that Northern Ireland is able to survive, revive and, ultimately, thrive. That also needs to include maximising resources, such as financial transactions capital (FTC), which could be an effective tool to kick-start our recovery, particularly through some of our vital infrastructure projects like the York Street interchange.

The further Vote on Account is a necessary means to enable Departments to continue building on their efforts to support our society. Whilst the £1.2 billion that we have received from the United Kingdom Exchequer is significant, the task at hand is equally significant, and we should not underestimate that. Therefore, we must ensure that the finite additional resources that have been made available to us are used efficiently and effectively to ensure that we achieve the best possible outcome and mitigate the longer-term impacts on our economy.

Finally, following an evidence session from the Department on 29 April, the Committee asked to be informed of any occasions on which a Department intends to make use of sole authority of the Budget Act to carry out a function; the so-called "black-box provisions". Full details of those provisions were included in the papers provided by the Department last week in relation to the Vote on Account. I thank the Minister and his officials for listening to the Committee and for the improved openness and transparency that is now being demonstrated.

As I will outline during the Second Stage debate on the Budget (No. 2) Bill, the Committee for Finance has approved accelerated passage for the Budget Bill to be introduced by the Minister later today. On behalf of the Committee for Finance and the Ulster Unionist Party, I support the motion.

12.00 noon

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): When we were here during the last Vote on Account, I do not think that there were many of us who thought that we would be back again a couple of months later for a further Vote on Account. Despite the additional expenditure on COVID-19, the allocation of 45% of the 2019-2020 departmental provision would have been expected to have seen us through until consideration of the Main Estimates in June. However, following a briefing by departmental officials on the Budget, I remember referring in the House to the considerable uncertainty regarding the Department's finances that was a consistent theme in that briefing, also all as a result of COVID-19. The fast, evolving nature of the crisis and the consummate response by the

Department seemed to overtake proposed expenditure before the ink was dry on any briefing papers.

The Department for Communities has been at the forefront of supporting vulnerable people, with a range of initiatives implemented at great pace. That has involved front-loading expenditure, sometimes without knowing how much it will cost. I must say that, while necessary, we have sometimes reflected on what this will mean for subsequent financing of departmental programmes whenever we get back to normal, whatever normal may look like.

It is extraordinary circumstances when, instead of Main Estimates in June, we have another Vote on Account. The idea that, technically, Departments are running out of cash is remarkable. I do not know whether the impact of that has quite sunk in. A couple of weeks ago, the Committee heard from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) about councils and how they could be close to collapse in the next few months. Last week, we heard about the dire straits that the voluntary and community sector is in. Tomorrow, it is the turn of the arts sector, and, next week, the sports sector.

While I applaud the actions of the Minister for Communities and, indeed, all Ministers, I cannot help but think of the fictional story of the little Dutch boy who put his finger in the leaking dam to prevent people from drowning in the hope that someone would come and fix the dam properly. This Vote on Account and the subsequent Bill for its approval are clearly necessary to get us through the next few months, but what assurance do we have that our finances will be in any more stable a position when we come to autumn?

The cash requirement in the Vote on Account for the Department for Communities is 80% of its 2019-2020 provision, which is what we are told should ensure that it is able to continue to provide services to the end of October. I note and welcome the additional COVID-19 allocation of just over £20.3 million from the Executive and the potential for a further £20 million. No doubt every penny of this will be spent.

I also note that £23.5 million will be spent on welfare reform mitigations under the sole authority of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Committee has asked about the legislation necessary to ensure that this expenditure is on a proper footing, but, despite briefings from the Minister, there is still no sign of this. We cannot go on pushing this down the pipeline. If we are to have a sound hold on our finances, we need to agree on big-ticket items like welfare mitigations.

These are difficult times. As we come through this crisis, we may have to face up to the prospect of a very different society. We may have to accept at some point that limited financial resources bring with them difficult choices. That time may not be now, and it may not even be in the autumn, but, when all is said and done, we have to be prepared for a possible reckoning, and that is going to take considerable will, effort and vision.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for his statement. As Members have outlined, we are faced with a unique situation, therefore the normal budgetary process cannot happen at this moment. The accelerated passage outlined is complex in nature, however, to be fair to the officials who came to the Committee, they did simplify it for us.

This Budget Bill is basically to avoid the Departments running out of cash before the Main Estimates are set out. It will give approval for cash and use of reserve to use funds during this public health crisis. We did not know the full impact of COVID back in March when the Budget Bill was passed. Since then, Departments have had to spend greater amounts of cash than anticipated. The priority became keeping people afloat, keeping wages paid and protecting livelihoods and businesses as best as possible.

When we discussed the Minister's request for accelerated passage through the Assembly, certain Standing Orders had to be suspended, and issues of transparency, accountability and the Main Estimates were discussed. However, there were few options, as some Departments could run out of cash. Indeed, the Minister said today that that could happen as early as June.

The COVID-19 crisis has necessitated unprecedented high public spending. The scale, timing and pace of the crisis mean that the legislation is required to ensure that all public services can continue to be delivered during the COVID-19 period to support the health service, businesses and vulnerable people.

Mr O'Toole: We are back today with a further Vote on Account, one that is, I agree, necessary. I should say upfront that we, as a party, will be supporting the further Vote on Account and the Budget No. 2 Bill, which we will be debating technically later today.

Not only are we giving the Bill accelerated passage, as Seán Lynch said, but we are debating and passing both the Budget No. 2 Bill and the further Vote on Account a month before we normally would in ordinary Budget times. Since the Assembly came back in January, Budget debates have been a little bit like London buses: we waited three years for one and we get half a dozen at once. The truth is that we have had quite a lot of debates, but we have not had that much scrutiny. While, as I said, my party will be supporting the further Vote on Account and the Budget No. 2 Bill, there are concerns about the specifics of the provisions and also about the continued lack of anything approaching a Programme for Government or a joined-up, long-term policy response to COVID-19. That is critical, because we are being asked to make the further Vote on Account specifically because of the unique and exceptional contingency of the COVID-19 crisis.

First, on the specifics of the further Vote on Account: we are, in effect, voting to give the Department of Finance permission to disburse virtually all, and, in some cases, more than all of the full-year's cash — more than 100% of it — for Departments in order to prevent them from running out of money in the next couple of months. That is a reflection of the extraordinary pressures created by COVID-19, including decisions by Departments to front-load spending to ensure that contractors and community groups get the benefit of planned spending now when they need support the most. That is welcome in principle, but there are significant questions about our capacity to scrutinise how that money is spent. It will put extreme pressure on the Main Estimates, which come later this year, and also on the in-year monitoring rounds. It will put an extreme onus on the Finance Committee, of which I am a member, and also on the whole Assembly, to give proper and detailed scrutiny to the monitoring rounds.

I also have questions about money that is being centrally held to deal with, as yet, unspecified priorities. I have a particular bee in my bonnet about centrally held items, given that I discovered, a couple of weeks ago, that we are still centrally holding £2 million a year to subsidise non-existent long-haul flights to North America at a time when we have no short-haul connectivity.

Anyway, back to those unspecified centrally held items. In a background paper given to the Finance Committee, the Department specified a particular category of allocation. In a summary document provided to the Finance Committee, the Department described some of the allocations that had been made as potential COVID-19 allocations, including the £95 million for the Infrastructure Department. The allocations were set out in some detail in the background paper, but they are not covered in the summary document that we have been provided with today, that is the further Vote on Account. The background paper made it clear that they are potential COVID-19 allocations, but, and I quote:

“This should not be taken as confirmation that this funding will ultimately be provided to this Department. Rather, it is simply a working assumption.”

Now, the £95 million for the Department for Infrastructure — there are other Departments, including Health and Communities that have potential COVID-19 allocations — is particularly important, given what we have just heard from the Infrastructure Minister about the pressures facing her Department, Northern Ireland Water, and our transport network. If that £95 million is still a potential COVID-19 allocation, it would be helpful to have it confirmed, by the Finance Minister, that it will not be taken off the Department and reallocated elsewhere. Indeed, the Finance Minister’s statement last week said that £59.5 million of the £95 million transport allocation remained unallocated. However, the background paper that the Finance Committee received indicated that it could be reallocated at a later date. It would be helpful to have clarity on that.

Moving on to the broader picture, it is somewhat discouraging and depressing, although I welcome the fact that his Department has moved fast on allocations, that we are having a major budgetary intervention in the absence of not just an agreed Programme for Government, but even a date for when we will debate a joined-up economic and fiscal response to the COVID-19 crisis. Much of the action by his Department and the Executive has been welcome, but we now need something that is longer-term and less based on pop-up policy. COVID-19 has placed an extreme exigency on the Department, but we are getting to the place where we need longer-term policy.

When we debated the Budget a couple of weeks ago, there was some confusion. Some Departments were working to the draft 2016 Programme for Government, while others did not mention a Programme for Government at all. It would be helpful to know whether a new Programme for Government is in the offing and to what extent Departments are working from a draft Programme for Government in their budget planning. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance said, that would be helpful to know when we are debating a long-term economic and fiscal response.

There are many things that are unknown, as we come out of the crisis, but there are things that we do know. People

treasure properly funded healthcare and the crisis has changed the way that we work and the way that we relate to places.

We have heard from the Infrastructure Minister about the long-term vision that she has for changing our towns and cities, and active travel. We know that our economy, and those around the world, will change fundamentally as a result of the crisis, but, in the short-term, there is also severe damage to sectors that are disproportionately important to our economy: hospitality and tourism, small independent retail and microbusiness in general. We do not just need an economic recovery plan, although we desperately need that, we also need a joined-up strategy that looks at our fiscal levers and the kind of society that we want in five-years’ time.

To spell out what I mean, and as we have discussed many times in the Assembly, the sole fiscal lever that we have used and that has been politically acceptable to use by the Executive, is small business rates. Small business rates hit the sectors of the economy that are most uniquely damaged by COVID-19.

We will be going on to debate the Budget Bill later this afternoon and I will have time to expand further on some of my thoughts, and I hope that I will find some agreement with the Finance Minister. I will just leave with the thought that, while many of these allocations are welcome, we are over time for a joined-up economic and fiscal strategy. Friendly TV interviews are welcome, but I am afraid that they are not enough when it comes to a long-term strategy. We need joined-up economic and fiscal policies.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will begin by speaking on behalf of the Committee for Education. This has been a challenging year, in budgetary terms, for the Executive and the Department of Education. The Department of Education is struggling to overcome a backlog of financial pressures of over £400 million and, like all Executive Departments, it is faced with the challenge of responding to COVID-19.

The Department of Education advised the Committee for Education at the end of April that lockdown has reduced some of the pressures, but that many more have increased and that new pressures have arisen. The Committee for Education noted the substantial additional budget that was allocated to provide free school meal payments, increase Sure Start, support childcare provision, increase the early years’ pathway fund, provide a substitute teacher hardship fund and to procure a substantial number of devices to aid equal access to distance and blended learning. The Committee for Education welcomes that additional funding and the vital support that it provides during the emergency.

Many Committee members also wish to see additional funding to support tackling holiday hunger, extending counselling services and in further support for vulnerable children. The Committee members also require further rationale for the additional funding that the Education Minister is seeking for preparatory and boarding schools. Notwithstanding those comments, the Committee for Education supports the Supply resolution for the further Vote on Account, as it applies to the Department of Education.

I will now make a few comments as an Alliance MLA and the party’s spokesperson on education. We are in the midst of a global pandemic, and the focus of the

Executive and the Department of Education must be on the emergency response to COVID-19. The Alliance Party supports the Supply resolution to allocate Executive funds, but the Executive, and in particular the Minister of Education, cannot forgo the action that is needed to address the financial crisis that is facing the education system, in addition to the challenge of COVID-19.

12.15 pm

The former chief executive officer (CEO) of the Education Authority warned in 2017 that, without radical investment and reform, the education system would be unaffordable, socially immobile and unfit for 21st-century learning. Our education system has a crumbling school estate, excessive class sizes, a special educational needs (SEN) framework that fails children with SEN, the separation of children on the basis of community background at the age of five and an unfair and unnecessary approach to post-primary transfer. Despite the dedication and professionalism of our teaching and non-teaching staff, that is not the education system that we should want for our children and young people. Fundamental root-and-branch reform remains urgently necessary for education. It is concerning, therefore, that the Education Minister has suspended work towards the drafting of terms of reference for the independent review proposed by the Alliance Party and supported by the Assembly. It is also concerning that existing reports, such as Burns, Costello, Bain, Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation (ILIAD), Heenan and Sahlberg have not been implemented and that area-based planning has been so ineffective and sectorally based.

The focus on COVID-19 is, of course, understandable, and schools need urgent guidance on social distancing, curriculum content and blended learning now and to prepare for the proposed phased return to school in August. That focus, however, must not be used as cover to unduly delay the urgent action and reform needed to arrest the financial crisis in education, nor can investment and progress towards the childcare strategy, school budgets, the emotional health and well-being framework and the new SEN framework, including the SEN regulations and code of practice be shelved. The people of Northern Ireland demand better, and we must work together to deliver it. A well-resourced, innovative and integrated education system to deliver high-quality educational opportunity for all is needed now more than ever.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the opportunity to again outline the Committee for Infrastructure's consideration and views in respect of today's debate. First, I will reiterate the size of the deficit facing the Department going into the pandemic, and then I will speak about the impact of COVID-19.

The Committee's scrutiny of the Department's finances has highlighted again and again the stark situation that it faces. In January, the Department for Infrastructure told the Committee that its budget had a recurring structural deficit of £61 million going into 2020-21, set to rise to £80 million in 2021-22 and to £90 million in 2022-23. That was before the COVID pressures that have since arisen. The Department's budget for 2020-21 has increased by 8.6%, which amounts to an additional £33 million on last year, but, despite that, it remains inadequate. The Department

has warned again and again of the severe implications that that will have for critical infrastructure services.

The Minister told the Committee that she had yet to decide on the final distribution of allocations. However, given the issues already highlighted and the significant shortfall between available and required funds, we know that there will be pressures that the final allocations will struggle to address. The first is water and sewage. The Utility Regulator's determination on Northern Ireland Water funding is inescapable: it has not been funded to the recommended levels, meaning that it is unable to connect new housing developments and businesses to sewage networks at over 100 locations in Northern Ireland. The potential impact on the economy will only increase in the COVID recovery period and does not consider the funding requirements of the Living With Water programme over the next decade.

Water and waste water are, of course, just the first area of concern. Officials also told the Committee that, prior to the 2014-15 budget reductions, some £35 million would have been allocated to cover routine road maintenance and winter requirements. In recent years that budget has been cut to less than half that. The implications of that are stark but no less stark than the recent Barton and Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) reports on structural maintenance of the road network, which recommended that the Departments of Finance and Infrastructure work towards ensuring funding of £143 million per annum on a recurring basis to prevent further deterioration.

Turning to community transport, we are all aware of the important role that it plays in connecting our rural communities, so the Committee noted with concern a reduction in the Department's provision to a number of those organisations in 2019-2020 amounting to some 35% of the overall baseline since 2013-14. The Committee noted that community transport initiatives across Northern Ireland assisted access to and facilitation of services that are the remit of other Departments and has raised the question of whether other Departments should assist with funding. The Committee welcomed the announcement by DFI and DAERA that joined-up measures have been put in place to support people in rural areas who are isolated through COVID-19, but more of that could be done.

The list of pressures goes on: a contract to buy new carriages for the rail network; the procurement of new buses; funding for Waterways Ireland; and the design phase of York Street, to name but a few.

I have, of course, left the most notable shortfall until last. Translink has been forced to run its service at a deficit for a number of years and to use its reserves to supplement it. As the £19 million request for Translink in the monitoring round was unsuccessful, its reserves next year will be below the level of working capital that it needs, and we face the real possibility that it may cease to be deemed a going concern. The COVID-19 crisis has seen Translink's revenue streams dry up. As we gradually move out of lockdown and into our new normal, which will require social distancing, there will be an inevitable impact on our public transport service. Additional vehicles will be required to accommodate the safe transport of children to and from school and employees to and from their place of work. The question arises of how that will be funded. The money has to be found from somewhere, and the recent statement by the Minister of Finance was not encouraging.

What impact will that extra requirement have on the budget, in particular, on green recovery schemes and on capital infrastructure projects?

The Committee is aware that there is a COVID fund designed to mitigate the challenges arising from the crisis. In a briefing on the COVID response and the budget, the Minister set out a departmental estimate of up to £181 million of COVID-related pressures: £90 million to £114 million from the loss of revenue to Translink; between £17.5 million and £32 million for Northern Ireland Water; and £8.6 million for three months, increasing to £19.4 million for six months and £30.7 million for nine months, for the DVA. Despite that and the pre-existing shortfalls, the Committee found itself writing to the Finance Minister to seek clarification of why the Department for Infrastructure was the only Department not to have received an allocation from the COVID fund at that stage. The Finance Minister announced additional funding allocations in his statement last week, namely the £30 million set aside to mitigate Translink's loss of income, but it is clear that that is still just a drop in the ocean. The Committee looks forward to hearing that additional funding from the remaining £59 million of the transport budget that is still to be allocated will be earmarked for the Department for Infrastructure. However, it is clear that, even with this, hard decisions about key priorities will need to be made, and that is without the Department's obligations under the New Decade, New Approach deal.

There is a strong argument that significant investment in infrastructure will not only mitigate existing risks but will be vital in kick-starting our recovery as we move out of lockdown. The Committee for Infrastructure will, of course, continue its scrutiny of the Department for Infrastructure's budget.

I would like to make some personal remarks on community transport. As a representative of a rural constituency, I am genuinely concerned, as we should be, about the impact of COVID-19 on the budgets of our local providers. Approximately 35% of their budgets comes from self-generated income. As a result of the lockdown and social distancing, opportunities to fill that gap have ceased. If we are to believe the deputy First Minister's assertion that social distancing is to remain in place for the next two years, many of those organisations will no longer exist. While I welcome the fact that DFI now assists those organisations to furlough staff, that will go only part of the way to easing their burden. If the Department for Infrastructure and the Department of Finance do not work together to uplift by some 20% to 30% the grant available to the organisations that need it, the service will be lost and very soon.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): The Committee is acutely aware that the Department for the Economy has been in the eye of the storm, so to speak, in responding to this devastating crisis. That, amongst other reasons, is why it is one of the five Departments likely to run out of funding by the end of June; hence the need for today's Vote on Account. As I have highlighted on a number of occasions, the Committee is extremely supportive of the response of the Department and, indeed, the Executive to COVID-19 so far. The Committee is advising on gaps and issues in that response as well as on strategies and solutions to recover and rebuild through our extensive stakeholder network.

Members will acknowledge that, as a key driver of the COVID-19 response, the Department for the Economy must have its budgetary needs prioritised as much as possible. The Committee is aware that the Department is seeking to repurpose and reprioritise its budget and those of its arm's-length bodies as part of the June monitoring process to allow it to allocate further funding to its COVID-19 response. The Committee is very supportive of that proactivity on the part of the Department. Members also urge the Executive to consider making available any further funding that the Department may need to widen its COVID-19 response so that more businesses and sectors can be included and to fund the recover through the upcoming June monitoring round. The Committee appreciates that the crisis and the job of keeping this place running require considerable funding. However, the Department for the Economy has a unique role in not only responding to the crisis but leading our recovery and rebuilding following it.

The Department for the Economy continues to lead the response to Brexit and the impact of the protocol. It is dealing with the RHI inquiry response, and it is driving forward strategies across a range of policy areas, including energy, tourism, further and higher education, skills and others, that will be key to our recovery when the terrible human tragedy of the COVID-19 crisis abates. The Department also leads on a number of key actions coming from New Decade, New Approach that will assist our recovery.

The Committee will continue in its work of scrutinising the Department for the Economy's use of its budget and supports today's Vote on Account. Members are also being very proactive in collating the solutions to the crisis that our stakeholders bring to us, allowing us to provide the Economy Minister and the Executive with significant information to inform our recovery and the rebuilding not only of our economy but of our society. I remind Members that Statutory Committees have a key role in advising and supporting Ministers in the development of policy. That is a role that the Economy Committee fulfils and will continue to fulfil, regardless of any obstacles.

I will now make some brief remarks as Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. Obviously, COVID-19 has had a huge budgetary impact, and there are real challenges facing the economy and wider society as we respond. The necessary measures put in place to protect public health have forced many businesses to close and workers to stay at home. The funding that has been made available to support businesses — £410 million in grant support and over £300 million in rate relief — has been most welcome, but the Minister will likely agree that further support will be required to help businesses recover and to protect jobs and livelihoods in the time ahead. Some sectors have missed out on the business support grants, including sole traders, small manufacturers with NAV over £15,000, some businesses in the most impacted sectors with NAV over £51,000 — they will need specific support to recover in the longer term — social enterprises with charitable status and the newly self-employed. They are all entrepreneurs or SMEs that have invested their time, energy and money into their businesses, which are vital to our local economy and need support. The rates holiday, of course, has provided much-needed relief, but many of those businesses suffer from a lack of cash and are understandably reluctant to

take out loans when they are unsure whether they will recover to repay them.

The Finance Minister has asked Departments to look closely at their budgets, and the Economy Minister must explore what further support is required and what funding in the Department can be redirected to support businesses to survive and to stimulate economic recovery, alongside what the Executive do in allocating funds to the COVID-19 response. The British Government will also need to step up with additional support in the form of financial and fiscal stimulus. The coronavirus job retention scheme has been vital, but its continuation and flexibility in the scheme will also be necessary in the time ahead.

It has become increasingly apparent that some businesses may only slowly come out of lockdown and some sectors will take much longer to reopen and longer still to become profitable again. It will be important that the Executive have a comprehensive plan for economic and societal recovery guided, of course, by the medical and scientific advice. I have been contacted individually and via the Economy Committee by businesses, representative organisations and others with innovative proposals on how they can reopen safely and possible support measures that will be required, not just financial but practical. It is vital that there be a collaborative approach to the recovery plan, and I welcome the continued work of the engagement forum, which has brought together businesses, trade unions and others. It must have a role in the longer term also. We must all — government, business, academia, community and voluntary — work together in the days, weeks and months ahead to come out of this. I support the Supply resolution.

12.30 pm

Mrs Cameron: When I consider any aspect of our budgetary process, I always revert to the fact that we all stand on a platform of delivering the best possible public services and the best value to the taxpayer, and that is certainly what my party stands for. Regardless of the Department involved, that should be at the very heart of the budgetary process.

As Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, I have sat through much evidence about the Department's budgeting, its drive for savings and so on. Surely the consequence of COVID-19 will be simply to obliterate all financial planning done in our health service to date. Already, we are seeing in-year pressures that are a cost of COVID-19. It will be no different next year and for who knows how long after. This is a budget that will continue to face unprecedented challenges. Who on these Benches does not want to see a more interventionist approach taken by our Health Department when it comes to the welfare of our older people, particularly those in care homes? How much will personal protective equipment (PPE) cost the health service moving forward? In the context of social distancing, how will we invest in our health service to ensure that patients receive the best care for the smallest risk? How do we address the huge mental health problems in our society? All of that is going to cost huge sums of money. We can add to that the obesity crisis among our population and the pressures that that brings to our health service. We also have an increasingly older population. Indeed, we are leading more medically complicated lives, thanks to our incredible NHS and those involved in research and development.

There will be more pressures to come on the health budget. The urgent need to step up our care and support for those with autism is clear. That is something that our Health Department has as yet not taken seriously enough, even though just over one in every 20 schoolchildren is now being diagnosed with autism. We can no longer look the other way when all those people are in need of help.

Those are immediate issues that need to be addressed. There is an urgent need to reboot our health service in the areas of routine surgery, diagnostics and cancer care, to name but a few. With those pressures being faced, surely we cannot allow the Bengoa report to gather dust. The longer that it does, the longer that our health service will fail to deliver on the fundamental principle of being the best value to the taxpayer and the best possible service.

Once again, I urge the Minister to set out his road map for reform and to be bold. Let it be an ambitious timeline that equips our health service to meet each and every possible challenge that comes our way. We have the best possible asset in our world-class staff, but we must support them, not just with the right pay and recognition but with the right tools to do the job as best they can.

COVID-19 ought to have given each and every one of us food for thought as to what really matters in life. Our time on this planet is short, and that should shape how we prioritise the spending of the public's money. That is what really matters. It is a test for this place to be mature and grown-up in taking those spending decisions and not to prioritise spending on areas that ultimately matter less and to much fewer people over, say, spending on tackling suicide or helping children with speech and language therapy. I certainly know where my priority lies.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Éirim le heolas a roinnt libh ar mhachnamh an Choiste Sláinte faoi na brúnna airgeadais reatha. I will provide some information on the Health Committee's consideration of current financial pressures. No discrete briefing has taken place on the Department's assessment of when its resources would be exhausted without today's initiative, but the budget briefing last month provided some broad brushstrokes on additional costs associated with COVID-19. Officials were keen to underline how uncertain the picture was at that point.

Mar is eol dúinn, tá pleanáil, maoiniú agus cur i bhfeidhm seirbhísí ina gcior thuathail de dheasca na géarchéime sláinte, agus is cinnte go mbeidh said amhlaidh amach anseo. As we know, the ongoing health crisis has caused massive upheaval in the planning, funding and delivering of services, and it is likely to continue to do so. With strong warnings about the fluidity of the situation, the Department advised the Committee last month of its assessment that the costs of COVID-19 could run to upwards of £500 million in resource expenditure, which is significantly more than it had received at that point. Officials also expressed a degree of hope that pandemic costs would be met, however.

Cuireadh na Meastacháin seo leanas faoi chomhairle an Choiste. The Committee was advised of the following estimates: £104 million required for workforce pressures, including the deployment of retirees and students to provide additional front-line support, as well as overtime, accommodation for staff and recruitment costs; £232 million required for equipment and supply, including PPE, the increased cost of drugs and the emergency supply

of medicines to vulnerable patients; and around £200 million for additional service delivery costs, such as increased hospital admissions, including ICU, COVID-19 testing, emergency dental facilities and supporting key delivery partners in the pharmacy and dental sectors. The Department was also estimating a further £1 million to support digital health and communications as part of the COVID-19 response. Finally, a further £16.5 million capital expenditure was projected in relation to oxygen generators, IT requirements and COVID assessment centre facilities.

Officials advised us that it was not possible, at the time, to quantify a range of additional costs, such as additional ventilators being purchased, reconfiguration of hospitals, contracts with the independent hospitals for additional capacity, and ongoing requirements for PPE and testing as the pandemic progresses. More recently, costs have been incurred in relation to scaling up the contact-tracing operation. At that point, the Department had been allocated £205 million, with a further £150 million held in central reserves for PPE.

The Department acknowledged a number of financial knock-on effects of the pandemic. It forecast that, due to redeployments to deal with the crisis, there would be less capacity to conduct other routine services. The Committee has been advised of lower than usual attendance at GP practices and emergency departments, leading to concerns that patients could begin to present with cancers or heart conditions at a more advanced stage. Clearly, that is primarily a health concern, and people should be encouraged to come forward for their well-being, but it will also create greater pressure on the system as more advanced treatments or preventable surgeries are needed. We have been advised that, in deferring elective procedures, the already serious waiting list backlog is now worse, and, again, some people's conditions may have deteriorated to the point where they now need more serious interventions.

The Committee was advised, in April, that financial planning in health and social care (HSC) was likely to remain uncertain for the next three months at least, though additional costs, as I have outlined, are demonstrable. For all those reasons, though the Health Committee has not had a chance to come to a formal view on the Vote on Account, I am sure that Members will welcome extra resource going into the HSC at this time.

I will make a few additional remarks as the Sinn Féin spokesperson for health. The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 crisis has put us in a political space where we must take prompt, effective and necessary action to reduce the virus's impact across our communities. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, we were faced with significant budgetary pressures brought on by 10 years of Tory austerity that has starved our public services across the board. Our block grant, which in real terms is £360 million below pre-austerity levels, has left us with health, education, infrastructure and other sectors starved of the resources that they so badly need.

The health service is a case in point. Staff shortages, record levels of waiting lists and unaddressed, significant and growing health inequalities across our communities are just some of the challenges that we faced when the Assembly resumed in 2020. As the COVID-19 crisis took hold in our society, it was clear that our health service was

ill-equipped to deal with the pandemic. Shortages of the most basic equipment highlighted, in no uncertain terms, that austerity had left us exposed and vulnerable in any emergency. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document raised hopes that we, as a decision-making body, could begin to address the impact of Tory austerity. Sadly, the British Government reneged on many of the promises contained in that agreement, and we are left with public services and a health service that, quite frankly, operate on life support.

The impact of COVID-19 cannot be overstated. Sadly, we have lost loved ones, friends and neighbours. The economic crisis that we face will be significant and perhaps unlike anything that we have ever seen before. We know that the crisis will be exacerbated by the economic and political upheaval of Brexit; a reality brought to us by the worst instincts of British exceptionalism and one that we, as a society, did not vote for.

Thug COVID-19 dúshláin dúinn san am atá romhainn, ach léiríonn sé gur gá dúinn rudaí a dhéanamh ar bhealach difriúil. COVID-19 has presented us with many challenges for the time ahead but it has also shown us that we must do things differently going forward. We must choose a path of economic and social justice. We must build a health service that protects all our citizens from ill health and disease. We must build homes to address the housing crisis. We must address the inequalities that exist all across our society, in health, in education and in opportunity. We must invest in our communities, in our people and in our public services.

Ms McLaughlin: I accept the urgency with which the Supply resolution needs to proceed through the Assembly. It is driven by the critical need to secure access to cash for Departments to continue to deliver services in the face of the evolving COVID-19 situation. However, I believe that the challenge that we collectively face is the need to be strategic and coherent as we deal with the worst health and economic crisis that we have ever known. Sadly, I do not believe that the Executive have sufficiently shown the way out of the economic crisis. Yes, it is good that many businesses are being rescued, but we need a plan and I do not see one.

The Executive have gone back to the good old days of ministerial compromises without having a joint approach. The old ways of divvying up the money between the two largest parties have returned, but to what end? We are likely to be out of money very quickly and, perhaps, with limited lasting impact. What exactly are our priorities? Are we clear that there is no going back to normal? I will suggest some priorities. We have a generation of young people who are leaving school, college and university with no jobs to go to. We need a blended skills training and work-based programme that will enhance their skills instead of giving them their first taste of the labour market by being unemployed.

Next is the sustainable infrastructure that must be adapted to the needs of our changed economy and society. We need broadband to be rolled out across all of Northern Ireland. The Department for the Economy has told me that 89% of Northern Ireland has serviceable broadband, but that leaves 11% of properties without good enough broadband. For that 11%, that means the impossibility of working from home and, for many, the impossibility of keeping their job. It means the impossibility of studying from home; it means

social isolation and vulnerable people being unable to do home shopping. It has an impact, especially on women who are isolated at home and who continue to take on the majority of caring and parenting roles. We need to ensure that the North has broadband that is fit for the 21st century. We need the fastest possible broadband, delivered at the fastest possible rate to the greatest number of properties and within a reasonable budget.

We also need to accelerate investment in water infrastructure. Reflecting on the Belfast and Derry city deals, that will help to drive our economy out of the deep recession that we are heading into. Without adequate water infrastructure, however, those developments, too, may be slow to provide the growth that we need. We also need to reflect on how our economy and society will be reshaped by coronavirus. The nine-to-five, Monday to Friday office routine has had its time, at least for the moment. That will change how we use our urban centres and our investment strategy.

We need to focus our support on the type of economy that we want to build for the future; that is, the green economy. We need the green new deal. That is the focus of the European Union as it seeks to build its way out of the crisis. It is the focus of many in the Democratic Party in the United States and it is a programme that has won support here from the trade unions, youth movements, employers and many political parties. We need to get on with creating jobs, improving our quality of life, reducing heating costs, improving air quality and cutting carbon emissions. That is our vision for the future.

While we will support the Vote on Account today, there needs to be a greater focus on developing a plan for Northern Ireland.

It is a shame that we have not seen a coherent vision from the Executive. That is now their challenge; that is now our challenge. It is a collective challenge.

12.45 pm

Mr Chambers: Whilst recognising that we are not in normal budgetary circumstances, it must be remembered that, under the 2020-21 Budget that was previously announced by the Finance Minister, our health service was left facing a shortfall of £71.6 million against forecast inescapable pressures. The Finance Minister will have been well aware that his Budget allocation of only a number of weeks ago would not have enabled the health service to maintain even existing services. Similarly, his Budget allocation had not granted the Health Department a single additional penny to deliver on the further priorities set out in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, for which, it was estimated, an additional £169 million was required. Whilst delivering everything contained in New Decade, New Approach was always going to be a long shot, we need to remember what some of the more important pledges were. The requirement included much-needed investment in enhancing and developing services and covered vital funding for enhancing and reforming social care, growing the social care workforce and improving its pay levels, for example. That is something with which, I presume, the Finance Minister still agrees.

In addition, a further £50 million was sought to fund an elective care action plan in order to allow us, as a society, to get to grips with what were already truly abhorrent

delays in our waiting times. I dread to think what the length of our waiting lists will have grown to post-COVID. I am aware that the Department of Health has already listed £30 million as an inescapable cost pressure to maintain existing services, specifically to control waiting times for red flag, urgent outpatient assessments and elective treatments that have a direct impact on patient safety and clinical outcomes when diagnosing and treating cancer and other time-critical conditions.

To be clear, the Finance Minister's previous allocation to the Health Department would not have allowed the Health Minister to make any progress on tackling waiting lists. Given the hugely destructive impact that COVID-19 has had on elective care services, can the Minister give a commitment that neither he nor his Department will be found wanting when the Department of Health inevitably seeks the necessary resources to try to repair some of the frightening damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on our already appalling waiting times?

I return to the recently announced mental health action plan, which recognised that there will be a surge in mental health issues post-COVID-19 as we continue to return to normality. Minister, will it be resourced? What will be the level of that financial support?

In the debate, there have been numerous mentions of Tory austerity. We need to place on record that we are grateful to the British Government for the financial help that they have given us as we fight the virus and try to mitigate the impact on our economy. We need to take our blinkers off and recognise that support.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next Member to speak is Mr Paul Frew.

Mr Frew: I was not expecting to be called so soon, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but I will carry on.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Wing it.

Mr Frew: I will have to wing it. Of course, I always wing it, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

We find ourselves in a completely unique situation. One of the biggest worries that I have is that officials in the Department are out of sync with the normal practices that they have always gone through. We should not forget the fact that, for a long period, there was no Assembly or Executive. Circumstances were not normal to start with, which would have put officials at a disadvantage straightaway. Then the crisis happened; this emergency that we have to deal with. We have tried, since we cranked up the Assembly and Executive, to get into a normal situation where we have a Budget and a Vote on Account. Things were cranking up to normal, and then we were blasted by this emergency. We are left in a position where Departments will run out of money.

This is not normal. As an Executive and Assembly, we have to deal with this surreal problem. I give credit to the officials who have had to work and firefight through this emergency, with all these figures, facts and pressures. I give credit to the Executive, and the Minister, with regard to last week's decision on the rates. It is a game changer. The rates decision means that businesses that were contemplating going out of existence can now survive. It is a massive weight off their shoulders. It has to be welcomed, and I take the opportunity to welcome it in this debate. It is a massive thing for businesses.

We have a situation where a number of our critical Departments will run out of money. We have been left in a position where the Department has had to bring a further Vote on Account. We are in a surreal situation. We understand the mechanics of that, and why it is the case. We have no choice but to support this further Vote on Account. However, what really worries me, in this House of scrutiny, is how the money is going out. Out of necessity, it is flooding out the doors to get money on the ground to finance the emergency. Where is the scrutiny, the value for that money? Where is it going? Is it going to service providers and contractors that may not exist to fulfil contracts in the coming months? Is that something that we need to be careful of? What about value for money in purchasing some of the stuff that we have had to acquire? Is it the case that we have had to purchase at above inflationary prices, because the demand is there? How will that information get through to the scrutiny Committees so that informed decisions can be made as to how we move forward and learn lessons?

I do not for a moment suggest that, after this is all over, we look back with rose-tinted glasses, or blinkers, and be critical of Ministers who have had to make fast decisions. I am not saying that. However, I worry about value for money and how the public pound is spent. It is bound to be the case that, when we have excess flows of money in quick time, mistakes will be made. We have to make sure that those mistakes are kept to a minimum and, at the end of it, they do not happen again, if we go to another situation like this.

We should be thankful that we are in the United Kingdom, where we have the capacity to draw down Barnett formula money of £1.2 billion. That has helped and saved our people through this crisis. We would not have had that ability if we were in any other jurisdiction, or on our own. Being in the Union is invaluable. You cannot measure it. It is much more than £1.2 billion: every year, it is much more than that. It is not just about financial or monetary terms. It is about being in the place, the nation of the United Kingdom. This is just one illustration of the capacity and the strength of being in the Union.

Many Members said that we need to get to a point where we are not only fighting the crisis but have a strategy or plan to move forward and recover. I am yet to see that recovery plan. I am yet to see a Budget that is aligned with a Programme for Government that would help with most of those issues, because of the way in which it is written at present. I know that we are talking about another Programme for Government. However, the previous draft Budget was not far off the mark. It was all about making people's lives better and the sorts of things that will be needed in the recovery.

I will mention one thing about the details of the Vote on Account that has worried me since it first appeared. It seems to be the case that everyone — every Department, every arm's-length body and everything in between — will get finance, even when they are not running out of money. It worries me that the only body that will not get money is the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation. I know how it is funded and that it is not the same as the Department. I know that it is not the same as the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission or the Northern Ireland Audit Office. However, the principle remains because those three bodies — the

Food Standards Agency, the Assembly Commission and the Audit Office — have all got higher Vote on Account allocations that are not related to the COVID-19 response but rather recognise that their 2020-21 Budget outcomes are higher than their 2019-2020 positions.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Frew: Those bodies have received funding that is not related to the COVID-19 response. Why is it the case that the Utility Regulator is working on 25% of its budget from the previous year and has received no money from the Vote on Account? It seems bizarre to me. I worry about that going forward.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: For someone who was winging it, the Member used plenty of time.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. When we return, we will continue with this item of business. The next Member to speak will be Ms Karen Mullan.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £8,225,189,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £9,050,940,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 1, and column 4 of table 2, in the Northern Ireland Estimates Further Vote on Account 2020-2021 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 May 2020. — [Mr C Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, we now return to the motion on the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates Further Vote on Account 2020-2021.

Ms Mullan: As has already been pointed out, this is an unusual measure that we are being asked to support today but, without doubt, we must do so. The unusual nature of this measure is reflective of the uncertainty that the COVID crisis has brought with it.

I will take this opportunity to commend the Finance Minister, and my party colleague, Conor Murphy. Since the outset of this crisis, the Minister has fought not only to save lives, but to protect livelihoods. He has also ensured that resources have been made available to assist those most in need. In my role as my party's education spokesperson, that has been entirely evident from his announcements since the return of the Assembly. The Minister increased the level of funding available to the Department of Education by 11% compared with last year. That increase made it possible to resolve the long-standing industrial action by teachers. Significant sums of money have been allocated to special educational needs, an area which has been underfunded in recent years, and which has impacted on some of the most vulnerable in our society. Last week's announcement by the Finance Minister of an additional £4 million made it possible to provide financial support to our substitute teachers who have been left without an income since schools closed.

All of that has been done in the context of a global health pandemic, which brings not only consequences for the health and well-being of our loved ones, but also very difficult economic consequences. I have said it before, but I will say it again: the difficulties we will face will require new and dynamic thinking. The cross-departmental cooperation that has been so successful throughout this crisis must continue. Where opportunities arise and

common outcomes can be achieved, we must look at how Departments can share the costs of achieving them. I urge other Members to support today's Vote on Account to ensure that our public services continue to deliver and operate unhindered in what are truly difficult and unprecedented circumstances.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute on the matter before the House. Again, I thank everyone involved in the Assembly's administration throughout the crisis for continuing to provide the structures to allow Assembly business to continue at this time.

I speak as someone who has been a farmer for many years. My remarks today refer to the business of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. On behalf of the Department's staff who work behind the scenes and those who work in the agri-food industry and who rely on the various services offered by the Department, I pay tribute to my colleague the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Edwin Poots, for his efforts to date. The Minister has shown a knowledge and willingness to push forward, and he has been proactive in addressing the concerns of the farming public from a general agricultural perspective. He has also been a leading voice in setting out measures and responses to the current virus crisis in Northern Ireland.

The business before the House today is necessary to ensure that all the various departmental services across Northern Ireland — in some cases they have reduced, in others they have increased — have the necessary budget and authority to continue to operate in the current conditions. I support that determination and, given the new circumstances we find ourselves in, our Finance Department must maintain a very close watch on financial requirements across the structures and respond, as funds allow, to the very changeable environment that we now operate in due to COVID-19.

From both a DAERA and a farming perspective, it is clear that our agri-food industry is very much pushing on through this crisis and that it continues to meet the increasing needs of consumers in Northern Ireland and further afield. That attitude, as I have said previously, is commendable and shows the depth of commitment, purpose and resolve that exists within our agri-food industry, with everyone involved putting their shoulders to the wheel and ensuring the security of our food supplies during this crisis. It is also important that our Departments do likewise and continue to provide the necessary services to enable industries to function. I am pleased that that has been happening and it must continue. Whilst some services within Departments may be on a reduced footing, it is important that structure is maintained and that resources are redirected and best utilised. Where reduced requirements are evident in one element of service delivery, it is vital that resources are directed to where other requirements have increased due to the COVID-19 response.

The issue within DAERA is that, despite the pressure of Coronavirus, the agriculture sector has had to maintain a high output status. Speaking as someone who lives on a farm, operations have had to continue, for example, cows need to be milked, land tended to, crops harvested and so on. That is repeated on every outdoor land farm right across Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Department's backup has had to be in place in these difficult circumstances.

Agri-food production is a very heavily monitored industry with many checks and balances in place to maintain our very high food production standards and traceability. Despite the pandemic, the same level of monitoring must continue. In these difficult days, that will, of course, put a strain on the Department. I know that the Minister is aware of this reality and will respond to pressure proactively, as he has been doing to date.

With regard to the Department's backup, it has been good to see that online facilities made available to farmers have continued to be taken up and, by and large, successfully. That is important and enables payments to be checked and compiled in a structured manner. Staff must be credited for the behind-the-scenes efforts in administering payments with such efficiency. For instance, with regard to single application forms, it is notable that applications received by this year's deadline exceeded those received last year, proving that, despite the current crisis, farmers were able to navigate the system and complete the applications on time. In a time of crisis, that is an example of farmers taking all reasonable steps to comply and assist the Department. Whilst there was some discussion around the potential need for a deadline extension, that was proven not to have been required, as the application numbers have clearly shown. I commend farmers and those in Northern Ireland who assist with filling in forms for their efforts.

Whilst our Committee business has been somewhat interrupted and made more difficult due to the pandemic and the response to it, I welcome a further opportunity, within the Committee, to debate and discuss the issues of departmental resources. As the demands on Departments are changing so dramatically and the situation remains so fluid, this will be a very challenging time for all Departments within our Administration. As the figures across all Departments show, the costs associated with government are not small and the assistance that has been offered to businesses and families to support people's income is welcome. However, there will be, as suggested by the Chancellor, a significant downside. Pressures in this Administration will, undoubtedly, greatly increase in the years ahead. We must prepare for that reality. In closing, I wish everyone involved in the fight against the virus my best wishes.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Supply resolution document shows that, for DAERA, there is an addition £1.5 million available for fisheries support. However, it does not mention the additional funding allocated, as a result of the Finance Minister's statement to the Assembly on 19 May. The statement referenced a further £25 million for the agri-food sector and market intervention and £3.8 million for waste. That was a very welcome allocation by the Minister in response to the challenges faced by our agri-food and horticulture sector as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Committee was aware that DAERA had made a bid for a much larger sum of money. That bid included £105 million for farming and animal welfare, £1 million for rural affairs, £16.7 million for waste and £1.3 million for the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). At the stage that the bid was made, the £1.5 million for fisheries had already been agreed.

The Committee had previously considered the planning assumptions behind the initial bid. We were in broad

agreement with those assumptions and indicated our support of the Minister's position. We are aware that the request for agri-food was so big that the funding would probably need to come from London and/or Brussels, and the Committee wrote to the Executive, MPs and the European Commission to indicate our support for the £105 million for agri-food.

The Committee met Minister Poots on Friday 22 May to discuss his plans for the funding. We heard that, while he welcomed the £25 million, he felt that there was no magic bullet and that the funding would not go far given that there are almost 25,000 farmers in the North.

Following on from Mr Irwin's comment on single farm payments, I want to add my commendation to DAERA front-line workers and farm agents across the North. Some 24,494 single farm payment applications were processed by the deadline of 15 May, which is a mighty achievement at any time, never mind in the middle of a COVID pandemic, when farmers and others were isolating due to the crisis. I want to place on record our thanks and commendation for that.

Minister Poots indicated that he was minded, at this point, to allocate roughly £2.5 million to ornamental plant growers and that the remainder would be used to target sectors such as dairy and beef. However, he was clear that that was indicative and that no firm position has yet been taken.

Members of the Committee expressed concern that no funding had been referenced for the lamb and sheep sector. We listened to the Minister's rationale for that, which was based on the fact that prices appeared to have recovered in that sector. He did, however, note that the entire farming sector is extremely volatile and unstable at the moment and that he has the option of going back to the Executive if further funding were required for any specific sector.

Committee members raised the issue that the funding could be used to compensate those farming businesses that had already successfully applied to other COVID-19 funding business schemes, such as the self-employment income support scheme (SEISS). That is a definite concern for some Committee members, who indicated that they would like to see some of the funding being used for businesses that are falling through the cracks of the other schemes, as they are either not eligible for other support mechanisms or receive so little from them that it is not worth talking about. Members gave the example of the beef and sheep sectors, which have had an average annual income of below £12,000 over the past number of years and would not benefit greatly, at all, from the SEISS. Minister Poots was aware of that issue and indicated that he wanted to ensure that he did not inadvertently overcompensate those who had already availed of COVID-19 business support mechanisms. He said that funding should be directed to those who need it most.

The Minister is hopeful that funding will be released in a matter of weeks and certainly by the summer. He asked the Committee to communicate to him what it considered to be the priorities. The Committee is considering that. We have written to a number of key stakeholders and will get back to the Minister in due course.

The Committee also asked what steps the Minister could take to ensure that the funding did not distort market prices. It is aware that a cash injection of around £25 million to the sectors could have the potential of

driving down prices paid by processors to farmers. The Committee was pleased to note that the Minister had considered that matter. Indeed, he referred to previous schemes, such as a payment that is linked to numbers of cattle slaughtered, which had had that effect. Committee members also picked up on issues of how farmers would apply for the funding, how it would be distributed, the timescale for it being paid out and how DAERA might address the issue of fraudulent claims.

From our ongoing scrutiny of the food producers, we are aware that the aquaculture sector was also suffering, so we were pleased to hear that £368,000 had been secured for it, with 80% of that coming from European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

In conclusion, a further issue that was raised by the Committee was equality screening. We all recognise that the funding should get out quickly to farmers; however, it is important that we do not forget to undertake equality screening to ensure equitable distribution.

Mr Catney: As my colleague has stated, the SDLP is broadly in support of the motion. I just want to make a point to Members across the House, who laud the benefits of the United Kingdom.

It is a political point. We, collectively, pay tax into that pot, and our people across Northern Ireland are entitled to those benefits. It is no handout. It is not given to us; it is an entitlement of all of us collectively. I just wanted to make that point, Mr Deputy Speaker, because, sometimes, it is hard to listen to the political points coming across when we are trying to have a serious debate.

2.15 pm

I note the Minister's rationale for choosing 80% of the proportion of the 2020-21 financial position to authorise to this Vote on Account. How confident is the Minister, given that this is only meant to serve the Departments until the end of October, that we are not creating massive financial stress for Departments for the last five months of the financial year? Everyone in the Chamber is aware of the financial stresses that will arise from COVID-19. I am pleased that the Minister has announced the extension of the rates holiday. I am also keenly aware that that announcement means that we have spent more than we have been given in COVID-19 funding. As we know, there are still holes in our support during the crisis, particularly for sole traders and the self-employed, as well as the long process that will be required to allow our hospitality and retail sectors to rebound. How confident is the Minister that, as more funding is required to deal with the crisis, departmental funding approval in this Vote on Account will be enough to secure the budgets until the end of October? Early warnings of spending pressures will be vital to enable us to adapt to fast-moving problems. As the first in-year monitoring round is coming up in June, are there any early warning signs, Minister, that the Departments are concerned about?

Since we got up and running, we have been chasing our tails in the Budget process. We are now about to put a second Bill through by accelerated passage, with the hope of a further Bill being brought to the House in the autumn. How confident is the Minister that we can get ahead of the process to allow the important, high level of scrutiny that needs to take place in the Budget process?

Finally, I will mention the crisis that no one seems to want to mention any more: Brexit. I read a distressing document from the EU Commission that stated that the UK Government — all right, they have moved slightly — are yet to produce even a timescale for delivering the structures necessary to implement the Northern Ireland protocol. I know that there is ring-fenced funding to deal with the EU exit, but, given that we are fast running out of time, can the Minister assure us that that is not another black hole in our Budget that we will need to scramble to deal with in the autumn or wintertime?

Mr Muir: When I spoke in support of the last Vote on Account on 24 February, I said the following with regard to the forthcoming financial year:

"the challenges in the next financial year ... are going to be significant and should not be underplayed by anyone." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 126, p66, col 2].

I think we all knew that the challenges would, indeed, be significant. Nobody was predicting that the Departments would require a further Vote on Account just three months on, and nobody was predicting that Northern Ireland would have over 50,000 people unemployed by the end of April and be facing the worst economic downturn in history. In the whole of our sitting on that day, there was not a single reference to the coronavirus that would take and utterly transform so many lives.

My party will support the motion today because those unprecedented circumstances have led to Departments urgently needing additional funding. It is, of course, the right thing to do to ensure that our vital public services can continue to operate. However, it is also extremely concerning that some Departments will effectively have spent around 45% of their budget when we are barely one fifth of the way through the financial year. While we could not have reasonably assumed back in February that there would be a further Vote on Account just three months later, this time around nobody can be unaware of the sheer scale of the financial challenges facing our Departments. A number of Ministers, including the Minister for Infrastructure this morning, have explicitly outlined additional resource pressures to get through this year. At this point, I declare that I was previously an employee of Translink and a member of Ards and North Down Borough Council. I agree with the Chair of the Infrastructure Committee, who talked earlier about the need to ensure that the capital funding that has been allocated to those Departments will flow. However, across Departments, revenue-raising activities have fallen off a cliff, while costs often remain fixed in order to maintain vital services, and furloughing is possible only in a relatively small number of cases.

The additional money allocated by the Finance Minister for COVID-19 from Barnett consequential has gone some way towards alleviating some of the most urgent front-line pressures, but it will not be enough to cover the gaping structural hole that has opened in some Departments. On that basis, there are two questions that need to be answered before the Assembly votes for the motion. First, we need the Minister of Finance to outline when he expects to get a complete view of the potential financial requirements from all Departments and the assumptions used to get those figures. Some have submitted detailed bids, but others have not. As the Chair of the Finance

Committee outlined, we still wait to see a detailed recovery plan. Secondly and, perhaps, even more importantly, we need to know where the money to meet those bids will come from. The UK Chancellor has spoken about devolved Administrations having access to the UK reserve for additional funding. Access to funding from that reserve is a useful tool, but it comes with a repayment requirement and, hence, should not be considered without exhausting all other avenues.

With more spending most definitely required across the UK to deliver the recovery of our economy and public services, especially our health and social care system, future Barnett consequentials are likely but are not guaranteed and nor is the size of those future Barnett consequentials known. Collective representations from the Northern Ireland Executive to Her Majesty's Treasury should, therefore, be a matter of priority to ascertain the scale and timing of any future economic stimulus and support for public services. I worry that we continue under the promise of jam tomorrow. Furthermore, I understand that the Assembly has the ability to borrow up to £200 million a year from the National Loans Fund for non-capital-related purposes. We need clarification of whether that is the case, whether it will be utilised and what strategic benefit will be realised from any borrowing undertaken.

It is the job of the Assembly not only to grant the Executive the legal authority to spend so that Departments can carry out their core functions, particularly in these unprecedented circumstances, but to safeguard the overall finances of Northern Ireland. By voting for the motion, we are doing the former; it is only by getting answers to our questions that we will achieve the latter.

I have two other points to cover. Mr Frew talked about the rate relief announcement that was made last week, and I, too, welcome that. However, we also need to recognise that rate relief on its own will not help businesses get through the forthcoming recession. Much more is required in terms of a more detailed and comprehensive recovery package. Touching on the comments on support for hauliers that were debated earlier today and last week, we understand that the Department for Transport has decided not to proceed with that package. I seek clarification from the Minister of whether the moneys that are already allotted in Northern Ireland can be used to support local hauliers, even though the Department for Transport is not proceeding with that. A number of them are on their knees and are very worried about their future. If we have that money allocated in Northern Ireland, we should be able to use it to help them.

Mr Storey: I will revisit issues that are pertinent to us all. As the Member reminded us, we are taxpayers as members of the United Kingdom. However, we also need to remember — there are many in the House who would like to forget — that what we bring in is not sufficient to run all the services that we have in Northern Ireland. If you read the document, you see that 85% of the total spend is as a result of the block grant.

Sometimes it is like going back to primary school: we need to be reminded of the law of first principles.

I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, because I want to revisit the way in which the finances have been distributed, via the Finance Minister, to the Justice Minister. We find ourselves in a

situation where, yet again, we are playing ping-pong. I thought that we had a collective, five-party mandatory coalition and that we were all towing together to work to whatever agreements we came to in order to see them fulfilled. The Minister will recall that I raised with him on the last occasion the funding of additional police officers in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The Minister, on that occasion, said that there were processes and that he had had a discussion with the Justice Minister. Thankfully, I had written to the Justice Minister before I asked the question in the House. I got a reply that was very enlightening for a number of reasons. One, it seems that the Minister of Justice is not really giving priority to the New Decade, New Approach agreement because, in the letter, she said that she had made it clear to the Finance Minister in a meeting that her priority would be the inescapable pressures in the first instance as they related to just standing still and that only once those pressures were met could she consider allocating funding to New Decade, New Approach-related costs. The letter also informs us that the Finance Minister is in receipt of the money that is needed to fulfil the promise made in 'New Decade, New Approach': £40 million per annum. It is not a case of just going out and getting additional police officers and paying them for the first year but not every other year. There are recurring costs that have to be met, and somebody has to pay the bill.

Of course, we notice that money was allocated to the new medical facility in Londonderry: only £15 million. When anyone looks at the current estimates for the running — the capital and the resource — of that project, the cost will be in excess of £30 million. Some people are hanging their hats on the Belfast city deal providing the additional money, but there is no doubt that it will have recurring costs that have to come back to the Executive.

Mr O'Toole: I am extremely grateful to the Member for giving way. He was talking about the ongoing costs of the Magee medical school. Does he agree that it would have been great to have the £2 million a year that is being spent on subsidising non-existent flights to north America, something that, I believe, was agreed by a previous Finance Minister who was a member of his party? I presume that he would agree that it would have been much better had we not put that in legislation and were not handing over that money every year.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for the question. I am delighted that he asked it, because his party wanted to sell an asset in relation to planes — the city of Londonderry's airport — and they did not even own it.

A Member: And the forests.

Mr Storey: And the forests. When it comes to dealing with public finances, the Member and his party have to take into consideration that the faults are not always on somebody else's side.

I come back to this point: I want the Minister to give a clear indication today — not, as the Alliance Member mentioned, jam tomorrow — that money will be allocated to fulfil the promises made and the commitments entered into on additional police officers. There are those who would like the Police Service of Northern Ireland to be run into the ground and be so constrained that would be incapable of dealing with public order and the many challenges that it faces.

Let us remember that for some of those pressures, the shortfall is somewhere in the region of £53 million for issues such as holiday pay, injury awards, estates, body armour, human resources, technology, district policing, custody healthcare and cybercrime. The list goes on. Members will come through the doors of the Chamber and say that these things are very necessary, but then their Finance Minister is not prepared to put up the money to ensure that those are delivered.

2.30 pm

In conclusion, I want to raise another area of responsibility that the Minister has. I have raised this with him previously, and I want him to take it away today and look seriously at the operations of CPD. I am not convinced that the Central Procurement Directorate is giving the public sector in Northern Ireland value for money. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of two schools in my constituency, Ballymoney High School and William Pinkerton Memorial Primary School in Dervock. Those two schools are subject to rules and regulations that cost them money four times more than if they had the ability to go out and procure in another means. Yet, seemingly, in the world of CPD, you are better spending £10 to be able to justify how you have spent £1. I think that it is long past time that CPD was brought under some financial scrutiny. Are we getting value for money? We are talking about a Budget here. Of course, when it is not your own money, some people seem to think that you can spend it whatever way you like and then give accountability to others to make it very onerous and very challenging. Now that we have, thankfully, set aside some of the procurement rules from Europe, which were nonsensical and, I hope, will never come back, I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us how he will deal with the issue of procurement and that it will not be as he dealt with it in regard to the procurement of PPE from China, which never actually transpired.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of this motion. We are facing an unprecedented health crisis that has affected and will continue to affect all parts of our society. The crisis brings with it massive ramifications that we will be dealing with for the foreseeable future. Of course, before this pandemic, we were already facing considerable financial challenges. Our block grant is £360 million in real terms below pre-austerity levels, and many's the Member across the Floor is denying that there was an austerity period, that there continues to be an austerity period and that we are and have been short of finances. We have had money taken out of this for long and many's the day, and that is why we are in the position that we are in.

I will use the example of Translink, which I know from my role as a member of the Committee for Infrastructure. Before COVID, the Committee had a briefing from Translink, and I also had a private briefing with one of my policy advisers. Translink said that, for the past four years, it has had to dip into its reserves to try to keep it going. If it did not have to dip into its reserves, we would not have had to look at the £30 million package for Translink that the Minister announced last week. I welcome that package, but the fact that that was necessary is part and parcel of some of the denial of some Members.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not live in denial: I live in the real world. Going back to this point, if

it was your own money, would you spend more than what you had or would you realise that there are some things that you could not do? It seems that the Members opposite have an endless list of things that they want to do until it is something that they agree to and are uncomfortable with, like the additional officers for the PSNI. Then, they are not so keen to find money. It is only when it suits, and maybe the Member needs to realise that we have to cut our cloth accordingly because that is one of the realities that COVID-19 is teaching us all.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Boylan: The Member has been here a long time, he is a member of a scrutiny Committee, and he was also a Minister and had to prioritise his own moneys, so he should know better. If the Member is on a Committee, he has an opportunity to scrutinise a Minister properly. The Member keeps saying austerity, austerity, austerity and dismissing it as if it had not happened. We have been cut down for long many a day. The last day that the Member spoke on the Budget, he said exactly the same thing. However, I gave the Member the opportunity to come in.

In the light of the constrained financial position and the austerity measures that I mentioned, I commend the move by the Minister of Finance to allocate an £8.6 million increase in resource funding, as well as a capital allocation of £558 million to DFI. That reflects the flagship status of a number of DFI's capital projects and the priority afforded to infrastructure by the Executive. It is vital that we see progress on those fundamental schemes. I see that Mr Muir has left the Chamber, but he will have a chance, as a member of the Committee for Infrastructure, to scrutinise the Minister and the capital spend. The Deputy Speaker, who is in the Chamber in a different role today, will have a similar opportunity.

As regards COVID-19 funding, I welcome the Finance Minister's announcement of £30 million for public transport. That is on top of the £20 million that was allocated a few weeks ago. That announcement will be welcomed by Translink, as it demonstrates the Minister's recognition of the importance of public transport. Earlier, Mr Allister mentioned the sum of £59 million or £60 million being held centrally for transport issues. I would like to ask the Minister whether concrete proposals have been brought forward to the Executive or whether there have been any enquiries as to how that money will be spent, in the light of conversations that have taken place. It seems to me that the Minister has been getting letters by pigeon, messages in bottles and electronic messages. Recently, instead of Ministers sitting round the ministerial table and having proper discussions with other Ministers, every MLA can write to every Minister. That is the role of MLAs. However, it seems to me that some Ministers take it upon themselves to write letters rather than engage with other Ministers round the ministerial table.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes, certainly.

Mr Humphrey: The Member is speaking in code. I do not have the code book. If the Member is referring to a Minister, could he advise the House and those watching exactly who he is talking about? I have no idea.

Mr Boylan: I have asked, on a number of occasions, three or four Ministers on the Floor of the House about funding

and support for the taxi industry. What I am saying is that Ministers in the Executive have been communicating through letters. If Ministers want to engage properly in the Executive, they should be in there having conversations. It is up to us as MLAs. We can write to any Minister to request a meeting with any Minister. That is the point that I am making.

Believe it or not, I agree with Mr Allister that the freight industry has been left out of all this. I know that there were conversations with the Treasury in support of the freight industry, but they seem to have fallen through. I know that the sum of £90 million or £95 million was mentioned, although £59 million or £60 million is still being held centrally. Can the Minister comment on those figures?

With that, I support the Vote on Account. I will comment later on the Second Stage.

Ms Bradshaw: I want to say a few words about health. It should be emphasised, however, that one thing that the current crisis has shown us is that health is all-encompassing. The impact of the public health emergency is felt across every walk of life and every public service. Never has it been more important to look across the silos and base our spending on outcomes.

The health crisis has enveloped us all. It is well established that the Health and Social Care Board and the Department of Health workforce were already working hard to prepare for the pandemic. As we address the Supplementary Estimates, we may be thankful for their planning and foresight.

The crisis has been shattering enough for us all, but without the pre-existing contingency plans and their dedicated work, it could have been much worse. Our key workers and volunteers who are working across the whole community, with the support of the whole community, have shown a spirit and a determination that has been rightly applauded.

We may note, therefore, that an extra allocation exists to ensure that nurses who had to go on strike, not just for fair pay but, vitally, for safe staffing levels to ensure the welfare of patients, will not be penalised for having done so. Like many in the Chamber, I joined the nurses on the picket lines: not a single one of them wanted to be there, nor should they have needed to be there. In the general scheme of things, the sum of money to achieve that is dwarfed by other mammoth allocations to deal with COVID-19, but it says a lot about what and who we value.

Of course, I am aware that Health accounts for over half of the resource allocation from the block grant. At this moment, we may be thankful that it does. We may also be thankful that another £205 million was allocated to the Department to manage the emerging pressures, with money for vital PPE and, more so, for the workforce. That was alongside nearly £7 million for hospices, the need for which is obvious.

There are also allocations to other Departments, which, in many instances, are no less health-related, in their broadest sense. I await further information about the £15.5 million for charities through the Charities' Fund and how it will be allocated. Inevitably, much of that will fall within the health and well-being sector. There are other vital areas, such as childcare and shielding packages, which may not nominally fall within Health, but are vital to it.

Away from Health, I commend the funding allocation for supply teachers, who had fallen through the cracks in the

original plans. Like many others here, my inbox was jam-packed with messages from substitute teachers who were in dire straits, so I very much welcome that allocation.

That takes us on to an area of the pandemic that I feel is often overlooked in the commentary: the implications of lockdown, including grief and suffering due to the scale of loss and the loss of livelihood, about which my colleague Andrew Muir and others have spoken. The implications are vast and have a particular impact on the collective mental well-being. They include the direct psychiatric issues emerging from the separation of family and friends, or even the lack of physical contact, right through to the rising rates of domestic violence and child abuse. Not only will we need to allocate funds to the mental health action plan and champion going forward, but we will need to mainstream mental well-being into everything that we do, including planning Budgets.

I am concerned that, going forward, we will have to seriously consider where we can find extra money to take us through the rest of the financial year and beyond. Do we have borrowing options? Do we need to look at revenue raising? Are there emergency funds that we can access? Should we get serious about cutting the cost of segregation? Most importantly, should we speed up the health transformation process? Those are challenging questions that we cannot shirk as we move through the pandemic.

To conclude, our job here today is to safeguard the finances of Northern Ireland and, most of all, the people of Northern Ireland. We trust that, in voting through the allocations, we are very much helping to do the latter, and that is why we must give them the benefit of the doubt. We will need more detail before we are sure that we are doing the former.

Mr Allister: Here we are again, discussing a further Vote on Account. I confess to the House that I do not fully understand why we have not simply moved to Main Estimates. I know that there is fluidity in the situation and that there are lots of unforeseens, but, at the beginning of the month, the Westminster Parliament put through its Main Estimates. It is living in the same fluid environment, so although I have asked the officials at the Committee as to why we too are not proceeding in the regular fashion with Main Estimates, I am frankly not convinced that there is a good answer to that. Perhaps the Minister, when he makes his winding-up speech, can explain why it is that we are drip-feeding, again, through an extension to more interim Estimates.

2.45 pm

That brings me to one of my main concerns. We allocated up to 45% of last year's Budget to last to the end of July. It has not lasted. We are now allocating in some cases up to 85% — let us say 80% — of resources to last to the end of October. To the end of October is only seven months of the twelve-month financial year. If we are giving authority to spend 80% of the Budget in the first seven months of the year, what on earth is going to happen in the last five months? Where are we going, in that regard? There is a limit to the size of begging bowl that you can produce.

I really would like to understand why we think that it is rational and right to take what equates to around 80%, in round figures, of our resources and effectively say to Departments that that is their budget just to the end of October. It does not leave much thereafter, and that has to be a major concern, certainly as far as I am concerned.

There are a couple of individual issues that I would like to take the Minister to. One of them has been referred to already in this debate. When I asked him last week about the haulage industry, he said:

I know that part of the transportation money that we had been holding back was in anticipation of a request in that area. That did not emerge, and we went ahead, then, with the allocation to Translink. — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 128, p151, col 1].

This morning, the Infrastructure Minister, when asked about that, talked much about the Department of Transport etc but she then suggested that there was still £59 million of transport money at the centre. Is that correct? Is there is a pot of £59 million labelled “transportation”? If that is so, is there any reason why the local Departments for the Economy and Infrastructure could not come forward with a proposal for the haulage industry to be supported to spend all or a substantial portion of that money? In other words, is that pot of money available? Leaving out the Department of Transport, leaving out the Treasury, is that pot of money available to help the haulage sector, because at this moment in time it seems to be the forgotten key component of our economy? I would like the Minister to elaborate further on that, if he can, because that seems to me to be a very critical issue.

On the Estimates, here we are, for the second time, effectively approving 80% of the spend with very little detail and just with global figures for each Department. There are no spending lines in this. The critical thing about any legislature is that it is the ultimate authority to spend money. The norm would be that you can see where you are spending the money. All that we can see are global figures for each Department. I do not think that that lends itself to either the transparency or the accountability that we should have. If we are going to produce these and a further Budget Bill, could we not at least have spending lines for each Department, so that we could see where the money is going?

Will the Minister confirm to me that by reason of the absence of Main Estimates, no Department legally can spend its own resources that it accumulates? Until the Main Estimates are approved, is it not the case that Departments’ own accruing resources cannot be spent? I would like clarification on that.

A final point has been troubling me. As we go through this economic and financial year, there is, by reason of coronavirus, huge demand, but, there must, surely, also be relevant savings in some Departments. There must be some Departments that, because of COVID, are not able to spend all that they anticipated spending. Yet these Estimates, the Budget Bill, will not reflect that at all. The Committee was told, “We will not know that until June monitoring”. Would it not be more logical to ascertain that now to see where the savings are that could be redistributed, rather than going forward blindly as to whether there are savings — I do not know whether there are, but I suspect that, across Departments, there must be — and utilise that money so that we do not allocate as much —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Allister: — as 80% to 85% for the first seven months? Maybe the Minister will explain that as well.

Mr Carroll: Who pays for this crisis will soon be a key dividing line in politics. The Tories and others are already pushing the burden of payment on to ordinary people. The current crisis, broadly speaking, has two ends: the first can be categorised as the immediate health crisis; the second is the deep economic crisis that demands a whole new economic outlook, one that prioritises the interests of working people over those of rich corporations and the wealthy. The period ahead is full of massive uncertainty, but one thing is clear: we cannot return to normal, economically or politically.

The current Vote on Account is a crucial starting point for considering the Assembly’s financial position, as is the upcoming Budget. The sentiment that we cannot return to normal has been reiterated around the world. There can be no return to our nurses standing in the freezing cold for months to get the pay that they deserve. There must be an end to the systemic underfunding of the health service to the point at which it is perpetually on the brink and unprepared for whatever crisis is round the corner. There must be an end to bottom-level welfare and the precarious employment contracts that leave too many on the cusp of poverty.

That was the position of my party and socialists before this crisis, but the response in this Chamber and in political chambers around the world has always been that the money is not there. If this crisis has exposed one myth, it is that the magic money tree exists. Suddenly, when big businesses need bailed out, there is a forest of magic money trees. When the likes of Richard Branson needs a bailout, that magic money tree is a whole island. The money has been there all along, and one way that we can get it is through taxation.

It is worth remembering that the two biggest parties in the last Stormont Executive spent the last 10 years begging Westminster for tax powers to give big business a break. For almost a decade, it was a major cornerstone in the economic policy of Sinn Féin and the DUP to ensure that the wealthy paid less in tax contributions. It epitomised the neoliberal economics that helped to bring the current ruin upon us. We have to ask why, as we sit on the brink of another economic crisis, the cornerstone of this Executive’s economic policy is not to raise taxes for the rich and fight for an urgent, radical redistribution of wealth across our society, thus ensuring that those who cannot afford to pay are not forced deeper and deeper into poverty. The DUP and Sinn Féin unashamedly begged for tax powers to give the wealthy a break. Why are those in charge here not willing to stick their neck out to give working people a break? Why are the Executive not even considering the use of powers that they have already to lift the caps on rates for the wealthy and high earners, drawing in more money to pay for parts of this crisis, at least?

In reference to earlier comments about the need for us to be thankful to the British Government, public funding is not the British Government’s money; it belongs to the taxpayer. It is a result of the labour of the workers who create the wealth in our society. We need much more public funding, and we need wealth to be redistributed generally.

This emergency demands emergency action, but neither this Vote on Account nor the Budget provides that. There is no ambition for a different kind of economic agenda. In my role as one of very few opposition MLAs, I will do my best to scrutinise and to continue to hold to account those who bring this legislation forward.

Take the health service. The big parties in the Executive have spent years implementing Tory cuts to our NHS. This had a very real impact during the crisis, with too few ventilators and intensive care beds, too little personal protective equipment and, with it, no capacity to properly test. Austerity was never an economic necessity, as even right-wing economists will now admit. It was always a political choice and, too often, the big parties in this Chamber went along with that political choice. Because of that, we entered this health crisis with an underfunded NHS and healthcare provision, which undoubtedly impacted negatively on the force of the crisis.

One might hope that there was a lesson here, but, when we look at the projected costs and how they play out in the new Budget to be proposed later today, it is clear that nothing has been learned. In the Budget, for example, much is made of a 6% increase for the Department of Health, which certainly would be promising if it were not for inflation and the fact that we are all living longer, adding to the costs of the health service generally. That means that this is not really an increase in real terms. If anything, it is a repeat of similar baseline austerity budgets. Indeed, as I pointed out in the Health Committee, these projections are predicated on a cut of at least £50 million to health trusts across this region: £50 million from our health service at a time when people are out every Thursday clapping for the NHS. It would be unbelievable if it were not so true to form.

It runs even deeper. It means the Bengoa report, which, behind the doublespeak, is predicated on efficiency savings. It means the continued underfunding of mental health provision at a time when mental health support should be at least doubled to meet the demand that is out there. It means a transport system like Translink continues to be threatened with going to the wall. It means millions for new roads, which will damage our environment through the use of cars, such as £75 million for the A5, and nothing to seriously tackle air pollution or invest properly in public transport.

Behind the tables and figures of these accounts and the buzzwords contained in the Minister's Budget document, this is the reality of the situation.

The economic model that favours a for-profit system is having a crippling effect on our society. In my constituency, the use of food banks has soared, and unemployment and welfare reform are killing people. Where is the ambition to do better after this crisis? Where is the leadership? Sinn Féin and the DUP spent the guts of 10 years, as I said, begging Westminster to let them cut corporation tax for the wealthy, but not a peep about raising taxes for those who can afford to pay more so that we can provide a better future for our communities.

Finally, I take this opportunity to reiterate my deep concerns about the lack of scrutiny throughout this budgetary process and, indeed, this Vote on Account. I will not labour the point; I only want to say that, in this scenario with a five-party Executive, I do not think it is healthy for all MLAs to endorse the Executive's actions. I will continue to challenge the Executive. Obviously we welcome new moneys and increased spending, but the point is that this Budget does not go far enough to tackle the needs across our society. As a member of the opposition, as a socialist and as someone who has witnessed the very real impact of cuts and callous austerity Budgets on people in my community and across this island, I will continue to oppose what looks set to be another austerity Budget, both in its

financial projections and its form. I will continue to use my role to hold the Executive to account.

Miss Woods: As we know, and as many have said in this Chamber, these are extraordinary times, and that is reflected in the Vote on Account proposals before us today. We were due to get the main Budget Estimates for the 2020-21 financial year. It was in my calendar, in fact, until last week. I was looking forward to offering some scrutiny on Budget proposals and departmental priorities, which we have not actually had the chance to do so far. However, because of the spending pressures relating to COVID-19 and the inevitable reallocations between Departments, the Minister and Department of Finance are telling us that it is not possible, and will not be so for another couple of months.

We are told that we will not get the Main Estimates until the autumn, halfway through the financial year. If today's votes are successful, Departments will have already had access to over 80% of the allocations, based on last year's allocations, as well as their COVID resources. What happens then? What happens after the autumn and for the remainder of the financial year? Clearly, the June and September monitoring rounds will be extremely important to monitor what is going on with departmental spending, and I hope that Committees and Members will be given the full details of what we need to scrutinise the spend.

Listening to the Finance Committee last week, I noted that questions were asked about the announcements of rates holidays for certain sectors and from where they were going to be funded. Is there a reliance on the June monitoring round for this business support?

I also wonder whether the Minister can address the fact that the Assembly will not have an opportunity to debate and scrutinise properly the budget allocations for this financial year until we are already halfway through it. Is that a good way of spending public money?

3.00 pm

We have not been able to make a proper assessment of departmental pressures, some of which relate to the New Decade, New Approach commitments, because the information supplied prior to the Budget vote on 5 May included so many "TBCs" and "not applicables". We still do not have any clarity on what that means, let alone any clarity on Brexit, which is equally unclear and for which details of what is going on are required. Is this a case of "Spend now and ask questions later", or are the Executive acknowledging here that Departments' spending might be in a mess but they intend to clean it up later on? It would be good to hear from the Minister directly on that point. If, after an unprecedented health crisis, spurring an economic recession, we are in a mess, how will we get our questions answered?

I understand the need to get resources urgently to cash-strapped Departments that are under serious pressure arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. We are in unprecedented times. I understand that many of the budgetary allocations that might have been in place for the start of the year may not be a priority now or come the autumn and that Departments need cash now. We will not stand in the way of that.

We welcome the support granted so far to our businesses, communities and vulnerable individuals, but we know that gaps remain. Many businesses and people in our communities are falling through the very nets that are

designed to support them. We need to do more. As the Minister will be aware, we need to support those not eligible for any current fund supplied by Westminster or by the Department for the Economy. Otherwise, many businesses will not reopen after this. We must also be very aware of the continuation of the furlough scheme. Any changes to it must be carefully considered. For example, if the hospitality business — one that I have acute knowledge of — cannot reopen safely, adhering to current social-distancing guidelines and the furlough scheme stops or is significantly altered, we will see mass redundancies, unemployment and closures. That is a fact. I am more than happy to explain to any Members from great personal experience how working in a kitchen, a restaurant or a bar cannot be done safely under the current social-distancing requirements. It is not possible.

Our councils, too, face huge financial pressures and will continue to do so. Much more will need to be done. Many other sectors — those dealing with mental health and support for addiction problems, the community and voluntary sector and so on — required huge resources and financing regardless of COVID, but their situation has now been compounded by it. We are yet to see a comprehensive economic recovery plan. As the Chair of the Finance Committee stated, it is somewhat overdue. I would welcome the Economy Minister attending the Chamber to outline her plan. We will need to know what it is so that funding can be allocated, but we also need to know what the document looks like. Will we get to see it, let alone scrutinise it? I reiterate: the economic recovery must be a green recovery. It must be a just transition for our people, our economy and our society. I am glad to hear the need for a green new deal being raised in the Chamber again today. It was stated, however, that many political parties supported it. All the Executive parties supported a green new deal in 2011, but, despite commitments, no strategy was adopted and no resource allocated. Those are the same Executive parties as are in office today.

Higher government borrowing is also spurring public fears of a new age of austerity in which public services suffer as a result of fiscal restraint that is justified by the COVID response. What assurances can the Minister provide to the House and to the general public that that will not be the case in Northern Ireland? Some in Westminster may have given assurances that austerity is off the table, but how much austerity can be avoided is uncertain without a plan. The Minister, after being asked on the radio this morning about the pending recession, stated that it would be severe for Northern Ireland, but how do we know that the Executive's approach to the problems is the best one? We do not have any of the details here. It would be helpful to hear from the Minister what other options were considered and what his expectations are come the autumn.

I look forward to the debate on the second Budget Bill, during which there may be greater opportunities to discuss the allocations, the allocations to other budgets and what is missing. I know that the Minister appreciates Members' feedback, but there needs to be a plan, with ideas and solutions for moving forward behind it, and that plan should be to build back better through a green, just recovery.

Mr Nesbitt: First, I apologise for my late entry to the Chamber. It was not my intention to speak, but I was listening and watching upstairs in my room, and I was struck by remarks made by my good friend Mr Catney.

He talked about how it does not matter whether you are a loyalist, a unionist, a republican, a nationalist or none of the above: if you are earning, you are paying tax and are therefore entitled to have access to our public services, and benefits are an entitlement. I get that very much. Indeed, I agree with him, but I hope that he would also agree with me that, traditionally, a weakness in our economy is that we contribute less to the Treasury than the Treasury gives us by way of the annual subvention that we call the block grant. In the same way, we were net beneficiaries of European Union moneys, and we have come out of the European Union with no guarantee that those moneys will be matched by the UK Treasury, never mind that we will be better off.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The debate goes back and forth, but, just as a point of clarity, the block grant does not represent the subvention for Northern Ireland — i.e. the gap between revenue raised in Northern Ireland and expenditure here. That is not what the block grant is. That is a different calculation, as it were. That is the amount of resource that the Executive have to spend every year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: I take the Member's point, but he will agree that the broad principle is that we contribute less than we get back. I will come to that again in a moment.

In terms of what the Minister does with the Budget, in my 10 years in the House and particularly in my five years leading the Ulster Unionist Party into repeated negotiations with the UK Government, it seemed to me that we were focused entirely on a dependency culture where we saying, "We need more", whereas I would like to see us switching to a prosperity agenda where we say, "Give us the tools for us to generate more". I am old enough to remember Harold Wilson, as Prime Minister — I think that it was in 1974 — calling us "spongers". On my wall upstairs, where I was watching the debate, I have a copy of a speech that the late Harold McCusker made in protest at the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. He talks about spongers:

"I have heard variations on the sponger theme."

As he goes on to say, we received £1.5 billion from the Treasury, 35 years ago. Today, it is £12 billion. The question has to be this: has our tax take gone up eightfold in the last 35 years? If it has not, what are we doing to generate more wealth, more prosperity and, therefore, more tax?

I just wanted to make briefly this point: yes, we have to protect our vulnerable; yes, we need to look after those who are dependent; and, yes, the welfare state is an entitlement. I prefer the term "entitlement" to "benefit". As well as that, surely, we must have a focus on reforming our public services in education and in health. Let us think about the many people who woke up today with poor mental health, with no sense of purpose in their life, unable to go to work and taking entitlements not because they want to but because they do not have the capacity to do anything else. Yes, we need money to transform our public services, but I also urge the Minister to have a focus on using money to create a prosperity agenda so that we become less dependent on the Treasury and more self-sufficient.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. I listen to the tone of the debate, and we are all in this together. That means those of us who were more fortunate and were able to make a good living out of the economy here through the Troubles. We need to realign our economy as well. When we come out of the pandemic, there will be opportunities to reboot the economy. I agree with the Member who talked about the hospitality sector. That sector is not stand-alone; it is key to the economy of the whole of the North of Ireland. If it goes down, tourism is down, hotels are down and thousands of jobs go with them. The point for Mr Nesbitt is that we are all in this together, and we need to shoulder the responsibility. Some of us are lucky. We are lucky that we can play —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that interventions should be brief.

Mr Catney: Thank you.

Mr Nesbitt: I agree with the Member. I remember him famously saying in the House that, as a publican, all he was concerned about at the end of the day was what was in the till. We should be concerned, metaphorically, about what, at the end of the day, is in the till for our citizens when it comes to their prosperity, their physical and mental health and whether we have created a society that is fair and equitable and in which, they feel, they have a fair shot. To do that, I firmly believe, we need a prosperity agenda, and I recommend it to the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister will have up to 28 minutes to make his winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Murphy: I know that Supply resolution debates can often cover many aspects that do not always relate to the Bill that is being considered. On this occasion, however, for all of us, the background of the COVID-19 emergency has helped to focus most, if not all, minds on the importance of the public expenditure decisions that have to be taken in this place. A range of points have been made in the debate, and I remind Members that this could be considered in broad terms to be the third Budget debate in which I have spoken in the last number of months.

I continue to recognise that what we are doing here is not ideal. We started with the ability to produce a proper Budget, given the fact that we were only back into the place in mid-January, with the difficulties that that presented. The area that we wished to get to, in broader budgetary terms, was a multi-annual Budget, given the spending review that is due to take place — that remains to be seen in Westminster over the course of this year with the possibility of a second Budget there in the autumn — with the ability to get to a broader, longer-term budgetary position. That would give people much more scrutiny and advance sight of spending down the line and an ability to assist in shaping that coalescence with our Programme for Government and the priorities that are set by the Executive and the Assembly.

On top of all that, the COVID issue has created huge uncertainty around how staff will be able to work and the additional spend that came our way, which had to be put together very quickly to get a response out on the ground. That had to be undertaken at a pace and a frequency to which, perhaps, the Civil Service and, certainly, the Assembly, were not used. That was done with only a small number of civil servants being readily available to us,

with others working remotely, and that has proved to be a significant challenge.

Nonetheless, I accept readily that what we are doing here, given that the main function of most Members is scrutiny as well as involving themselves in legislation and all of the other work that MLAs do, is not ideal. It is my strong desire to get back to a more normal budgetary cycle in which we can have advance sight and debate and full and proper scrutiny of all of the spending lines that Departments produce, with a chance to vote on those and to democratically decide how the Budget goes.

I thank the Committee Chairs for their contribution. They have, in the main, outlined the pressures and issues facing their Committees. I thank the Chair of the Finance Committee for his recognition of the need to extend the Vote on Account. I accept that we must also look to funding opportunities to support economic recovery. I can advise the Chair that the Department is looking at all the available options for resource and capital funding. As the Chair mentioned, the capital options include the use of the RRI borrowing and investment fund. The issue of borrowing was mentioned by others including, I think, Andrew Muir. Of course, the Executive have borrowed in the past and are paying off borrowing, which does not come without a cost attached to it. Therefore, in the uncertain financial circumstances in which we find ourselves, that is something that needs to be very carefully considered indeed.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving way. He is right that that comes at a cost, but will he acknowledge that borrowing costs for the UK Government — indeed, for all Governments at the moment — are at historic lows? For the first time, the UK bond yield has passed into negative territory, which implies that we should give it a good, hard look. It is cheaper now than ever to borrow to invest.

3.15 pm

Mr Murphy: Yes, I accept that, and that is why I outlined that we will look at all options in relation to that. That is the case, but we are paying off loans that were secured at a higher rate and so we have to look at the ongoing cost to the Executive's finances as a consequence of that.

There were a number of questions on my opening remarks about the risk of Departments running out of cash. That does not mean that Departments have spent a full year's budget. To be clear, Departments are continuing to operate within the budgets that the Executive have agreed for them, but it means that some Departments are getting close to spending 45% of the Vote on Account that the Assembly approved in the Budget Act in March. That Vote on Account was intended to last Departments until the end of July, but, because of the extra expenditure that the Executive agreed in response to COVID-19, for some Departments, the 45% Vote on Account will not be sufficient to last until the end of July hence the need for a further Vote on Account now.

There were a number of questions about transportation money for COVID-19. This crosses a number of Members' questions and I will try to answer them all in the same response. Somewhere in the region of £95 million was allocated as a consequence of transportation money spent in Britain. Most Members will know that that comes across as a Barnett consequential, although we are not restricted to using Barnett consequentials in the same area for

which they are allocated to us. They are not hypothecated in that way, and so it is a matter for the Executive to decide whether to spend it in that regard. Nonetheless, the Executive agreed to set aside that COVID money to consider transportation needs, and, under that package, we considered the needs of the airports and the ports and we will consider the needs of the freight industry and the haulage industry, which others have mentioned. There was a delay in allocating that money until we heard the conclusion of the discussion between the Department of Transport, the Treasury, the Department for Infrastructure here and, I think, the Department for the Economy. As I correctly advised the Assembly last week, I was informed that there was no case for that and, therefore, funding would not be allocated under that area, so I then went ahead with the allocation to Translink. I remind Members that that £30 million allocation comes on the back of a £20 million allocation as part of the Budget in March. Within two months, Translink has been allocated £50 million. I appreciate very much the difficulties that it and all our public services are facing.

Mr Allister asked whether there is a possibility that the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for the Economy locally could bring together a plan to support the haulage industry. There is no reason why they cannot come forward to the Executive with a proposition. As my colleague across the way will know, the Department of Finance can only deal — I will get on to his matters in relation to the PSNI and the Justice Department — with propositions that are brought to it. I cannot reach into a Department and decide, “You need money and here is how it shall be spent”. If Departments wish to engage with any sectoral interest that they individually — or, perhaps, collectively in the case of a number of Departments — have, bring forward a costed proposition to the Executive and make a bid for allocation from the Executive, they can do that. Bear in mind that, in the last allocation, we went substantially to the end of the COVID money that was available, but that does not stop a Department or Departments coming forward collectively with a bid. The Executive will then decide whether that bid is worthy of support. The same rationale applies to other issues, which, as I say, I will come back to.

We are very much aware of the situation with Translink. As I say, in relation to broader issues of ongoing support for various sectoral interests, be they Economy, Infrastructure or a crossover between the two, it is, of course, up to those Ministers to either work together or allocate the responsibility to one or other Department and take forward a proposition. I assure you that such a proposition will get a fair hearing in the Department of Finance, but it will then become a matter for the Executive to decide whether to support such an allocation. *[Interruption.]* I will give way to the Member.

Mr Allister: To be absolutely clear, is the Minister saying that there is still a £59 million pot for transportation that is not earmarked for anything else at the moment, so if Economy and Infrastructure get their act together, there is no reason why the haulage industry could not be helped?

Mr Murphy: Almost £60 million remains of the £95 million that was being held centrally. When I made the first statement, I said that that was unhypothecated — the Executive do not have to use that for transport. They could choose to use it for something else that they consider to be a bigger pressure at the time. Our recent allocations by way

of rates relief interventions to broadly support businesses have had a significant cost to the Executive and, of course, we will have to assess what is left, if anything, from the money that is coming through the business support grants. The Executive have to take those considerations in the round rather than allocating support to Departments in a piecemeal manner. We try to do it in stages. We assess a range of allocations together so that we can have some kind of oversight and a more strategic approach to all of that. He is correct in that £59 million of that £95 million has not gone to transportation issues. It is possible for Ministers to bring forward bids for that, but it is also possible for the Executive to decide to allocate that to another area.

There were questions in relation to the shortfall of the capital budget, generally. Again, I think it was the Chair of the Infrastructure Committee who raised that. In the most recent Budget, aside from the COVID allocations, the Infrastructure Department received over £500 million to prioritise its capital programme. That is almost 40% of the entire capital allocation available to all Departments. With that allocation, the Executive have prioritised funding for such flagship schemes as the A5, the A6 and the Belfast transport hub. There is, therefore, no shortfall of funding in those schemes.

I will go through some of the other points that were made. There is a general theme in all of this which I find amusing, and I refer back to Mr Storey’s comments about us all being in the five-party Executive together: when people are disappointed with their bids, it is either me on my own, or me and the Minister responsible who are found to be responsible for those things not happening. I know that there are new Members here, but everybody here knows how the Executive work. Bids are brought forward as part of a package. When Ministers support those bids, it means they reject other bids as part of the package. Therefore five parties agree these things. The Chair of the Infrastructure Committee made reference to community transport as if it was purely the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure and the Department of Finance. It is not. If there is a bid under COVID money, or anything else, for funding for community transport, or any other area, it is an Executive bid, and, collectively, the Executive will decide how it is done.

In that regard, I was disappointed and slightly surprised by Sinead McLaughlin’s remarks that the Executive are back to divvying up money between the two big parties. It is patently untrue, even on a cursory examination, that the Executive are divvying up COVID money in relation to the two big parties. The Department of Health got the second largest allocation of all of the COVID money that we received. The Department of Health belongs to the Ulster Unionist Party, not to the DUP or Sinn Féin. There is no divvying up between the two big parties. I go back to my point: the propositions are brought to the Executive. Only one Minister — it was not hers — objected to some of the allocations. The Executive have agreed every other allocation of funding that has been made to date. In agreeing the allocation of funding, they also agree to reject the bids that are unmet. I am not sure if that narrative is about playing at being in the Executive and in the opposition at the same time, or if it is some kind of scene-setting for an exit strategy at some stage, but it is transparently untrue. Regardless of the reason, it should be done on the basis of honesty. It is not right to throw out a cliché about the two big parties divvying up the money between them. Even a cursory examination

of the allocations that have been made to date shows that to be untrue.

There is also the idea that we do not have any joined-up plans. The five parties of the Executive worked for some time, and there were disagreements on how we would manage this crisis; that was evident. However, we worked through and reached an eventual agreement on a recovery plan to move us out of the lockdown. I am sure that I am not mistaken, but my sense is that that plan has got widespread approval from the public. Most people have commented that it is a sensible plan. That is a joined-up plan.

A number of Members mentioned the economic recovery plan. The economic recovery plan was sent to the Executive last, I think, Wednesday evening. The Executive meeting was to happen on Thursday morning. The plan was detailed and lengthy. In order to give Ministers, including Ministers from the smaller parties, a chance to properly study that recovery plan and provide commentary on it, rather than receiving it maybe less than 12 hours before the Executive meeting, we decided to put it off until the next available Executive meeting, which happens to be this Thursday.

The conspiracy theories around these things do not stack up. If the economic recovery plan had arrived on Wednesday evening, and been adopted by the Executive on Thursday morning, I am sure that that approach would have been correctly criticised. Therefore, the economic recovery plan will be discussed at Thursday's Executive, and we will attempt to reach an agreement on it. The characterisation of "divvying up by the two large parties" uses all the clichés of a number of years ago. I am not sure what the point is of trying to revisit that at this stage. I assure you that the money is being given out in a fair way, because the priorities that the Executive set themselves are being met. The central priority of the COVID money was to assist the health and economic crises and to protect vulnerable people. If Members look across the range of allocations for that COVID money, they will find that, by and large, that is how it was met. It did not matter which party owned the Department or what the responsibility was: that is what the Executive agreed, and that is how the money has been allocated.

Alan Chambers went on to criticise the fact that the Health Department did not have enough money to begin with. That is quite true. We have had nine years of austerity, brought in by the David Cameron-led Government. He may remember the position that his party adopted to secure a David Cameron-led Government, which was to offer its full support. These issues are the consequence of that. In a remarkable act of self-denial, he asked us to "take our blinkers off" and recognise that we got all this money from the British Government. We have had nine years of austerity, and that is why we needed a lockdown. It is because we have a Health Department that is not able to cope with a significant health crisis. It has been underfunded for years.

Mr Chambers then asked about the projects that did not materialise from the NDNA money. Again, we negotiated that in good faith with the British Government, and the first act that they did, when we reached agreement on the 'New Decade, New Approach' document and put the Executive back in place, was to withdraw the financial offer that they had made. That is why we are facing these financial difficulties.

On the one hand, you cannot laud the behaviour of such a Government, which you are quite entitled to do, then berate us for the place in which we find ourselves.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Sure.

Mr Nesbitt: I accept that he makes those points about the Cameron Government. Does he not accept that, in the health service's ability to handle the crisis, there is an issue regarding a former Health Minister, who sits on those Benches, who did not do all that she could, and was advised to do, in preparing for a pandemic?

Mr Murphy: It does not get away from the central point that the Health Department has been underfunded for a significant number of years and austerity has had its impact on that. On the one hand, you cannot support parties in Westminster, be it the previous Conservative Government or the last and current Conservative Governments, and then bemoan the outcome of those policies.

I will take some of the specific questions that were asked. Paul Frew asked about the Utility Regulator. The previous Vote on Account, already provided by the Budget Act 2020, provides the Utility Regulator with 90% of the total funding that it is due to receive from Government. No further pressure has been identified by the Utility Regulator. The Utility Regulator receives only a small proportion of its funding from Government. The majority of the funds that it needs to carry out its work are obtained through the fees that it charges to the electricity, gas and water industries that it regulates. If there are any pressures facing the Utility Regulator, there will be an opportunity to bid for them in the June monitoring round, and those can be considered by the Executive. However, we are not aware of any pressures that have been raised to date by the Utility Regulator.

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Frew: I am puzzled by that percentage. I might well be wrong but, looking at the figures in front of me, I want to know how the Minister gets to 90% with the information to hand. It seems to be that, last year, it was sitting at 25%. How does that go from 25% last year to 90% this year? I know that there is a difference between resource and cash. Can the Minister enlighten me?

Mr Murphy: The Member raised that question at Committee, and officials gave him an explanation.

If he wishes, I can ask officials to write to him to reiterate the explanation that was given to him previously.

3.30 pm

Members raised a number of other issues. I have tried to address them in a general sense with regard to funding for Infrastructure and other issues. Mervyn Storey raised, once again, the issue of PSNI funding. Having been a Finance Minister, he knows all too well that I can respond only to bids that are made to me. If no bid is made, I cannot respond. As far as I am concerned, no bid has been made in relation to increased recruitment. As he mentioned, I had a conversation with the Justice Minister, as I did with all Executive colleagues individually in the run-up to setting the Budget. I have not dealt with any bid in relation to that.

Of course, with regard to the setting the Budget, he also knows that the Executive approve it, and so does the Assembly. That is where that lies. I know that he likes

a bit of cut and thrust backwards and forwards across the Chamber with some of my colleagues, but to try to dress that up in some way as political opposition to the outcome of that spend is unfair because I have no issue with an increase. It was an NDNA commitment to which we signed up. I have no difficulty, and Sinn Féin has no difficulty, with standing over the commitments to which we signed up. Therefore, I assure the Member that support for the funding of that issue is not a matter of any political disagreement or reticence.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. It goes back to that territory of, "It is not my responsibility: I am waiting on those bids to come in". It is clear from what the Minister of Justice has said that she is not prioritising the additional police officers. She is working on other pressures. There are strategic outline cases. Some of them are, now, moving to business cases, which is some progress. My central point is this: a deal is a deal. If it said that there would be a medical school, and, on the opposite page, said that there would be additional police officers to bring the total to 7,500, that, to me, is a deal. It is not about waiting for a business case. It leads to the question: what was the process to remove the medical school from the Department for the Economy and the Department of Health and move it to the Executive Office? Why did that happen, given the fact that responsibility for the delivery of that project lay primarily in those two Departments?

Mr Murphy: First, in relation to the PSNI bid and the Member's view that it was part of a deal — I am conscious that this is my clock here, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will endeavour to be quick — if it was part of a deal, it is not the responsibility of the Finance Minister to go in and demand that the Justice Minister brings forward a proposition. There is a party leaders' forum, which, I think, was set up as a consequence of NDNA in order to discuss issues that might be outside the day-to-day workings of Departments. If there is an argument that that commitment is not being met, I suggest to the Member that that is the area in which to raise it and, hopefully, then secure an agreement. I am more than happy to play my part in that.

With regard to the Magee campus and Ulster University situation, there was a time pressure on agreements that needed to be made about matched funding of the inclusive future fund and also about the intake for the graduate-entry medical school. There was a lack of agreement between both Departments on which one would have lead responsibility for that. In those circumstances, correctly, the Executive Office and the offices of the First Minister and deputy First Minister stepped in to try to arbitrate and find a way through that. That is how it ended up in that Department.

I will try to conclude as quickly as I can. The issue of taxis was raised in the general sense with regard to the freight industry and haulage. Again, I want to say that I have had no proposition or costed case put to me at all. Executive colleagues raise the difficulties that their various sectors have at every single meeting. Sometimes, they write to each other about the difficulties that their various sectors have. However, when somebody wants an issue to be addressed, they bring forward a costed proposition to do so. That is how the sub-teachers' issue was dealt with. The issue with the agriculture industry was dealt with because the Agriculture Minister brought forward a proposition. That is how the charities issue was dealt with by the Communities Minister.

I am not precious about who decides that it is their policy area, but it is certainly not the policy area of the Department of Finance. Whether it is Infrastructure, Economy or a combination of both, no one has yet brought forward a proposition on how to deal with taxi drivers. I have seen plenty written and said about it, but I have not had any proposition, nor have the Executive the ability to consider anything. As I say, letters and emails come into the Executive all the time saying, "We have problems with this and problems with that", but that does not amount to a solution or a proposition for how to deal with it. If people want it dealt with, Executive colleagues know how to bring forward such a proposition.

Briefly, Jim Allister raised a couple of points about the Main Estimates. I explained at the beginning of the debate that it was impossible to produce a Main Estimates document of the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans because the Executive have been constantly reacting to the emerging COVID-19 situation. I announced the most recent allocations last Tuesday. If we had tried to write a document of the Executive's expenditure plans, it would have been out of date before it could be produced, and that is also why the Vote on Account cannot contain the level of detail that would be in a Main Estimates document. Clearly, I have committed to taking a Main Estimates document early in the autumn.

He also asked about what happens when we reach October and we have accessed up to 80% of our Vote on Account. As I said, we will bring the Main Estimates and an associated Budget Bill to the Assembly by the early autumn, and that will allow access to all available cash and to receipts accruing resources that are not available at the present time. I remind the Member that we have further spring Supplementary Estimates before the end of the final year to allow for further monitoring rounds that will take place throughout the year.

A number of other points were made. Mr Carroll raised the issue of taxes, and I remind him that we do not have the sort of taxation powers that he berates us for not using. When he refers to this as a new Budget, it clearly is not a new Budget; it is just an extension of an existing Vote on Account. I heard the litany of grievances that he raised, and I agree with many of the grievances that people find themselves talking about, but simply rehearsing those in every speech that he makes here does not provide any solutions. If he wants to hold us to account and to assist us in trying to provide solutions, which we are doing on a daily basis, for people who need them most, perhaps his contributions could be more constructive than simply rehearsing them, otherwise it is simply rhetoric.

Rachel Woods asked some questions about the furlough scheme in the hospitality sector. Clearly, we understand the issues that the hospitality sector is going through. The furlough scheme is extended to October, which is welcome, but we have no certainty from August through to October at what level the employer contribution will be, and that will have a real impact, particularly for those people who work in that sector, which is largely low paid and casual. That is why we included the hospitality sector for the rates extension till the end of the year.

To conclude, I completely agree with Mike Nesbitt about a prosperity agenda as opposed to a dependency culture. The argument about the subvention is the extent of it. Some people would have told us a few years ago that it was £10 billion, and in a recent answer that I was given by the Department, I was told that it was closer to £3 billion. Nonetheless, that tells us about the gap that we have to

close, and I would prefer that we closed that gap through our own efforts.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you and the Finance Committee for the agreement to take the legislation, which will follow by accelerated passage. I will draw my remarks to a conclusion. I commend the further Vote on Account for 2020-21 and ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I think the Ayes have it. As I am hearing Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting Noes, I am satisfied that the necessary cross-community support has been demonstrated. If Members wish to disagree, please repeat your opposition.

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): If that is still a No, for information, Members, you should continue to dissent if you wish to have a vote, and I will respect that on this occasion, as I should, so clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put in three minutes. I remind Members that they should continue to uphold social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

3.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, Members. Will Members resume their seats?

Before I put the Question, I again remind Members that, if possible, it would be preferable if we did not have a Division. Previously, Mr Carroll indicated his opposition, but I will put the Question again.

Question put a second time and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £8,225,189,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £9,050,940,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 1, and column 4 of table 2, in the Northern Ireland Estimates Further Vote on Account 2020-2021 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 May 2020.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: First Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 5/17-22], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of a certain sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2021; to appropriate that sum for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of that sum; and to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for that year.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be published.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I inform Members that the Speaker has received a letter from the Committee for Finance informing him that the Committee is satisfied that, in these extenuating circumstances, the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill has been appropriate as required under Standing Order 42 (2).

Housing (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Speaker has received correspondence from the Minister for Communities advising that the Minister of Finance is to introduce the Bill on her behalf.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Housing (Amendment) Bill [NIA 6/17-22], which is a Bill to amend the law relating to housing associations; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be published.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 42(5): Suspension

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That Standing Order 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill 2020.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limits to the debate.

Mr Murphy: As I explained to the Assembly when we debated the Supply resolution earlier, we face an unprecedented public expenditure situation as a result of the COVID-19 emergency. There is a real risk that Departments could run out of the cash allocated to them in the very near future, which would be unthinkable in the current situation.

Standing Order 42(5) requires:

“No Bill shall pass all its required stages in the Assembly in less than ten days”.

That ensures that the Assembly has time to properly consider and debate the issues. However, the scale, timing and pace of the COVID crisis are such that the usual legislative process is insufficiently agile to provide an adequate response. Therefore, I am taking what, I know, is a very unusual step in asking the Assembly to suspend the Standing Order to allow the Bill to complete its passage in a shorter time.

Members should be aware that, when a Bill completes its passage through the Assembly, it is not the end of the story. Other steps are required to be completed before Royal Assent is secured; hence the urgency involved.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): As already outlined by the Minister, the purpose of the motion is to seek the agreement of the Assembly to suspend Standing Order 42(5) to expedite the passage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill, which, as Members will be aware, completed its First Stage earlier today.

As I mentioned during the Supply resolution debate, the Committee for Finance has been kept informed on the financial resources that are necessary to support Departments and the need for the Bill to complete the necessary stages swiftly. While recognising that it is not ideal that legislation that has been subject to accelerated passage is then progressed in such a short time frame, we need to be realistic about the consequences of not progressing the legislation in that way. Therefore, the Committee has taken account of the immediate pressures on public expenditure during the current COVID pandemic, the need to provide sufficient financial resources to the Departments that are at a high risk of running out of money in the very near future and the current arrangements for sittings of the Assembly, which has been sitting for only one day per week.

Turning to the motion before us, the Committee is aware of the need to suspend Standing Order 42(5) and raised no objection to doing so. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Finance and the Ulster Unionist Party, I support the motion.

Mr Murphy: I appreciate the support of the Chair and the Finance Committee. I accept that the process is not, as he said, ideal, but it is necessary. The urgency with which the Bill needs to proceed through the Assembly is driven by the critical need to secure access to cash for Departments to continue to deliver services in the face of the COVID-19 emergency. I ask Members to agree to the suspension of Standing Order 42(5).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill 2020.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Speaker has accepted an application for a question for urgent oral answer to the First Minister and deputy First Minister from Mr Allister. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting for 10 minutes. When we return, the question will be asked and answered.

The sitting was suspended at 3.53 pm and resumed at 4.06 pm.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

The Executive Office

Interim Advocate's Office: Data Breach

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Jim Allister has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Executive Office. I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question as we go along, they should continue to indicate by rising in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically for a supplementary question.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action is being taken in respect of the data breach affecting victims of historical abuse.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Let me first say that our thoughts are very much with those who have been affected by this highly regrettable incident. The deputy First Minister and I fully recognise the impact that it will have on victims and survivors.

The interim advocate's office is sponsored by the Executive Office, but the advocate operates independently. The Executive Office has been in close contact with the interim advocate's office over this incident, which the interim advocate's office has formally reported to the Information Commissioner's Office. The interim advocate's office has notified and apologised to everyone who received the email. The interim advocate has made arrangements for further independent support to be made available to those affected through the WAVE Trauma Centre and its counsellors, and a number of people have taken that up over the weekend. That is in addition to the existing support services that are available through Lifeline and Advice NI. The Executive Office has asked the group head of internal audit in the Department of Finance to undertake an investigation, and that will begin immediately.

Mr Allister: I am sure that the First Minister recognises that the victims of historical abuse need their privacy more than most and that, therefore, when they discovered that their privacy was so spectacularly breached by their supposed advocate, it created a trauma that many of them are finding very, very difficult. In circumstances where the interim advocate and his office were the culprits, they clearly cannot advocate for the victims on this issue. Does not that in itself underscore that the interim advocate's position is untenable and that he should be relieved of his office because he has long since lost the confidence of many of the victims? Indeed, the major group that speaks for most of the victims has disengaged from contact with him. Is this not the last straw for the interim advocate?

In regard to the future, has there been foot-dragging on the appointment of a permanent commissioner? The interim commissioner was appointed last July, and the last that I heard was that it is going to be September before we can expect a full-time commissioner? Is that not letting down very badly those who need the most support?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for tabling the question for urgent oral answer and therefore allowing us to

come here to reflect on what happened last Friday evening. It is absolutely the case that we understand how these victims in particular have more to fear from data breaches than anyone else. I absolutely agree with the Member on that, and that is why, as well as the Information Commissioner beginning an investigation, which, of course, is independent and will take its course, we have set about a fact-finding investigation through the Department of Finance. We have received the terms of reference for that, and we hope very much that that will give us the facts in a very fast way and, I hope, within just a number of days. As you have heard from the interim advocate, he has said that, if he is found to be culpable, of course he will consider his position. I think that the Member will agree with me that it is right that we do go through due process in all these matters and that we do get independent fact-finding brought to the office. Of course, we will act when we receive that fact-finding information.

I recognise that there are some victims who do not have confidence in the interim advocate, and we are intervening to try to make sure that there are other ways in which we can advocate on behalf of them. I think that it is right that we do that. Some victims do still have confidence in Mr McAllister as their interim advocate.

To bring the House up to date on the appointment of the full-time commissioner, the selection panel, which, of course, will operate in accordance with the public appointments code, has been appointed. The competition initiation meeting has taken place, and the competition will be advertised by the end of next week. It is something that we want to see happen in fast time, but, of course, we have to again make sure that the processes can stand up. Believe you me, there will be no delay in appointing the new commissioner.

Mr Stalford: My question relates to information-handling systems. Can the First Minister confirm that the information-handling systems at the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board are different from those at the interim advocate's office? Going forward, it is important that victims have confidence that their information will be handled sensitively and appropriately.

How many complaints has the First Minister's Department received about the breach that is addressed in Mr Allister's urgent question?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. We do, of course, recognise that there may be concerns from victims who have made applications to the redress panel, which, of course, is in place now. To reassure the Member and, indeed, the many people who will apply to that portal: first, the system is completely separate; and, secondly, the redress board has introduced a system of internal controls, because it is very much aware that it wants to make sure that any potential information does not get out into the public domain. It is very alert to the fact that this is very sensitive information, and it wants to ensure that that is all kept in a private fashion. It is alert to all of that.

The Executive Office has received 15 individual complaints to date. Each of those has been responded to by our officials and will be taken forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Apologies. I now call Colin McGrath, the Chair of the Executive Office Committee.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the Member for bringing forward this important matter, and I welcome the opportunity for it to be discussed here. I think that that should, hopefully, go to show those victims out in the sector that we do treat this as a very serious issue. Obviously, a data breach of any kind is very worrying, but when it contains information as sensitive as this, it is a deeply disturbing fact.

I welcome, too, the fact that the interim advocate has self-referred to the Information Commissioner's Office, and it is crucial that any investigation there is thorough and prompt. What can the First Minister's Department and the Executive do to ensure that that investigation is prompt and swift? First Minister, you mentioned that there are some additional services and resources for anybody who wants to receive them. Can we get some more information on how that will be organised, on the basis that, obviously, people will not be able to go to the interim advocate to ask for direction to those services?

4.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair for his questions about the extra support services. They were put in place very quickly by the Executive Office, recognising the difficulties that have arisen as a result of the data breach. The Wave Trauma Centre has stepped in to give additional support. Supports are already in place for the victims of historical institutional abuse, and those are many and varied, depending on where you live in Northern Ireland. We want to ensure that there is no gap and that if people have specific issues that they need to address, they should do so through the Executive Office as quickly as they can.

In terms of the investigation, the Member is right that the interim advocate's office has self-referred to the Information Commissioner. That happened on Friday evening, as I understand it, and it is right that it should have happened. We in the Executive Office feel that there was a need to have a much shorter fact-finding piece of work carried out, because we have absolutely no control over when the Information Commissioner's office will report on the incident. As I understand it, the office is not the fastest in coming back on investigations. Therefore, we felt that it was important to have a fact-finding piece of work carried out by the group head of internal audit in the Department of Finance. As I say, that has started and should report very quickly. It should give comfort to the many victims that we are taking this very seriously. We want to get to the bottom of it, and we want to provide the victims with answers as to how it happened.

Ms Dillon: I am delighted to hear that there is to be a separate investigation and that it will be prompt. I acknowledge that the Executive Office has no control over the Information Commissioner's office. It is extremely important that those people get all the information that they can, because we are dealing with people, and I have worked with them on this issue over a long period, who have no confidence in the government hierarchy — with good cause. Those who were in power in their lives before let them down badly, and we have to acknowledge that, on many occasions, we have let them down. On

this occasion, we need to ensure that we do not let them down. Therefore, I am grateful for the First Minister's announcement.

Can the First Minister assure the House that all those on the list have been informed? I have spoken to some individuals who say that that is not the case. I would like to be very certain that everyone on the list has been informed and that they are given the information at the earliest opportunity so that they have the proper support in place. I have concerns about that.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I understand that she, like many others in the Chamber, has been working with the members of various groups over a long period. As I understand it, once the breach was identified — it was identified pretty quickly — there was an immediate attempt to recall the email. When that did not work, a request went out to all the recipients to delete the email. Later, an apology was sent to all the recipients. I would be concerned if the Member is indicating that some people have not been contacted. If she has the details, perhaps she would bring them to the Executive Office, because it is our understanding that all those who were involved in the initial data breach were notified. However, if the Member has information to the contrary that she could bring to the Executive Office, that would be very helpful. Indeed, it may help in the fact-finding investigation.

Mr Beattie: I thank the First Minister for coming to the Assembly to answer these incredibly important questions. This data breach was absolutely devastating. It has created incredible harm to people whose anonymity was the only armour that they had in their long fight for justice and recognition. Through incompetence, that has, for many, been destroyed. The response is wholly inadequate, because a letter dated 23 May that says, "If you have any questions for my office, get in touch on 26 May" is an inadequate response.

Therefore, given that the Executive Office is the sponsoring Department, can the First Minister outline the data-breach protocols in place? I do not mean information management; I mean what protocols should have been followed, once there was a serious data breach of the kind that we have just seen?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I do not have the details of the protocol with me today, but I am happy to share them with the Member. We will write to him with them. I know that the breach was identified very quickly and, to be fair to the interim advocate's office, it was indicated to the Executive Office a very short time thereafter. The advice about the Information Commissioner's office was then given by our office to the interim advocate's office. As I said, the interim advocate then reported himself to the Information Commissioner's office.

We have now taken the decision to also have this fact-finding piece of work, which I think will illuminate a lot of the questions that many Members and indeed victims need answered. As for the timeliness of reporting it to the Executive Office, I am satisfied that it was communicated in a timely fashion, but of course it should never have happened in the first place.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for coming here today. Given this latest incident, which has let down our victims and survivors, is it not time that the Government actually

issued the formal apology, as outlined in Sir Anthony Hart's recommendations in the inquiry? I think that it is long since time that they should have received that.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question on the apology. As the House will know, the Hart report recommended that the Executive should put out a public apology and that is one of the issues that the interim advocate has been working on. Of course, all of these issues do not make it any easier to find the appropriate language that the victims would like to see in an apology. We have been working with our interim advocate to try to get the appropriate language in place for the apology. We have been carrying out research in other jurisdictions, such as Australia, Canada and the Republic of Ireland, as to what the apology should look like. We want it to be an appropriate apology and we want it to be something that is owned by the many victims. Therefore, it is that piece of work that the interim advocate is still engaged on.

I recognise that there are some who do not want to engage with the interim advocate, so we have to put in place other mechanisms to engage with the people who do not want to engage with him. There is a lot of work to do and the deputy First Minister and I have communicated with the institutions and we have said to them that we want to engage with them. That is not just about the apology, which we do want to engage on, but we also want to engage with them about redress. We feel that the institutions need to step-up in terms of redress, and it is not just a matter for the Government. We intend to have a Zoom meeting with the archbishops of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland. I think that we will be having that meeting next week; it was set up before the data breach took place. The apology is progressing. I accept that this incident has made it more difficult to work together cohesively and to find the appropriate language, but it is something that we are committed to trying to find a way forward on in the near future.

Mr Buckley: I thank the First Minister for her answers on this very serious issue. It has rightly been outlined that this has caused a great deal of distress to already hurting victims of historical abuse. My question is about the timescale of, as mentioned in the last question, an apology from the Northern Ireland Executive and institutions. Is there any rough indication of when you would expect the investigation, which I welcome, to be complete?

Mrs Foster: With regard to the latter part of the Member's question, I hope that the fact-finding piece of work by the head of internal audit will happen in days rather than weeks. It is a very neat piece of work and there is not too much that needs to be looked into, so I do not think that it should take too much time to get to the bottom of it.

With regard to the apology, as I have indicated, that is very much something that we want to progress. The interim advocate has been working on the language of the apology. When the language has been worked through, a submission will come to the deputy First Minister and me to approve the apology. It will then go to the Executive because it is not just an apology on our behalf, it is on behalf of the Executive, so the Departments of Health and of Justice will also have a role on that matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to be concise in their questions so that all Members who wish to ask a question can do so.

Mr Nesbitt: I accept the First Minister's assertion that the office of the interim advocate operates independently, but it is also my understanding that the normal governance arrangements between a sponsored Department and a body like this would be governed by the management statement and financial memorandum. Is there such a document? If so, what does it say about data breaches and actions to be taken in the event of data protection breaches? If there is not, is there a bespoke protocol that governs those issues?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. As I indicated, whilst the interim advocate's office is independent, it operates under the normal accountability mechanisms and arrangements for an arm's-length body of the Department. A work plan has been agreed, regular oversight meetings take place between officials and the interim advocate and, of course, the Executive Office's accounting officer is responsible to me and the deputy First Minister, and is accountable to the Assembly, for the interim advocate's functions and everything that he carries out.

An official in the independent interim advocate's office has been designated as senior accountable officer and that office participates in regular financial and governance arrangements. The arrangements are as they are for all the other arm's-length bodies.

Miss Woods: I thank Mr Allister for bringing the question for urgent oral answer, given the seriousness of what has happened. The First Minister outlined the recruitment process for the new permanent advocate, and that will be advertised next week. Is there any clarity on when a new advocate is due to be appointed, and whether if the timescale has been delayed due to COVID or any other matters?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated, we hope that the competition will be advertised next week and then, with due process in the way that public appointments take place, it will probably be August before the commissioner is in place. That leaves a period where we will continue to work with the interim advocate, recognising the difficulties raised by many Members in the Chamber today.

Mr Carroll: I pay tribute to all the victims of historical institutional abuse. Many of them are in my constituency and they have campaigned for truth and justice and have fought for many years, facing obstacles along the way.

Victims are obviously concerned that their privacy and confidentiality have been compromised by this data breach. What assurances will the First Minister and the Executive give that steps have been taken to ensure that something like that never happens again?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Just reflecting on one of the other questions, we recognise anonymity has been the only shield that has been left to many of the victims. We deeply, deeply regret that this has happened.

We will, of course, try to get to the facts as quickly as possible and then the deputy First Minister and I will assess the position of the interim advocate's office. Indeed, he has said that he will assess his position after the investigation takes place. I think that that is appropriate because we all realise the impact that this will have had on many victims. The fact that we have had a number of complaints and that a number of victims have had to reach

out for help and support over the weekend is an indication of the seriousness of the breach.

This is not just a normal case of sending out people's addresses. We recognise that this is a huge breach, is very damaging and therefore appropriate action needs to be taken.

Mr Dunne: I thank the First Minister for coming to the House today. Will she give an update on the redress payments to victims by the redress board?

Mrs Foster: Yes, indeed. The redress board is set up. It opened for applications on 31 March and, some seven weeks later, the first compensation payments have been made. We are pleased that they have been made. It is a significant milestone and a very good news story. Victims and survivors are now starting to receive the long overdue — we all understand that — compensation, but it is good that we are making progress. We are very grateful to the president of the redress board for his prompt assessment and for the organisation of payment of the first round of the applications, all done during what has been a very challenging time for everybody because of coronavirus. It is encouraging that, even during this time of restriction, applications are being completed, submitted and assessed and that payments are now beginning to flow.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our question for urgent oral answer. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we change the personnel at the Table.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)

4.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 5/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limit to the debate.

Mr Murphy: The Second Stage debate follows the approval of the Supply resolution by the Assembly earlier this afternoon for the 2020-21 further Vote on Account. As I explained in the earlier debate, accelerated passage of the Bill is necessary to ensure Royal Assent before any Departments reach their cash limit for 2020-21, as set in the Budget Act (NI) 2020. I am grateful to the Finance Committee for confirming that, in line with Standing Order 42, the Bill can proceed under accelerated passage. The situation this year is unprecedented and could not have been envisaged when the last Budget Bill was being considered in the Assembly, back in February. However, it is hoped that we will soon be able to return to some degree of normality in the financial process. It is my intention to bring the Main Estimates to the House in early autumn, and I assure the Finance Committee that there will be further engagement on the financial position prior to that.

Standing Order 32 directs that the Second Stage debate should be confined to the general principles of the Bill, and I shall endeavour to keep to that direction. The Bill will authorise the cash and use of resources to allow Departments and other bodies to operate through the period of the COVID-19 response and the gradual exit from lockdown. Detailed Main Estimates and a further Budget Bill will be brought to the Assembly in early autumn. Copies of the Budget (No. 2) Bill and explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members today, and the 2020-21 further Vote on Account was laid in the Assembly on 20 May.

The Bill will authorise the issue of a further £8,225,189,000 from the Consolidated Fund and the use of further resources totalling £9,050,940,000 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2021. The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column 1 of each schedule. Those amounts are in addition to the amounts authorised by the Assembly in the Budget Act (NI) 2020 in March.

I stress that the amounts contained in the Vote on Account do not represent a set expenditure position. This is not an attempt to restate the 2020-21 Budget position that was approved by the Assembly on 5 May. As I set out at that time, the Budget could not contain a majority of the funding available for the COVID-19 response. Since then, the Executive have allocated significant amounts to support our health service, the economy and vulnerable people. This Vote on Account is essential to allow Departments to spend that money. It is based on a percentage of each

Department's 2019-2020 provision, and that percentage has been calculated to reflect our likely cash and resource requirements in 2020-21, including the impact of COVID-19. It will extend the existing 45% Vote on Account provided in the Budget Act (NI) 2020 to a much greater level. That will ensure that all Departments have sufficient cash to continue to provide services until the end of October.

In normal circumstances, a Vote on Account applies a uniform percentage of the previous year's provision to all Departments. That it is not possible in the current circumstances. The COVID-19 response does not impact on all Departments in the same way. The additional allocations made by the Executive have been targeted at the highest-priority measures. It falls to a number of Departments to deliver those. The Executive have responded quickly and flexibly to the COVID-19 emergency, and I announced further allocations as recently as last Tuesday, 19 May.

Clause 2 of the Bill provides for the temporary borrowing by my Department of £4,112,595,000. That is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 1 for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. I stress that clause 2 does not provide for the issue of additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power, but it does enable my Department to run an effective and efficient cash management scheme.

The use of the sole authority of the Budget Act was raised during the debate on the Budget Bill last March. When a Department makes use of the sole authority of the Budget Act, it will highlight that fact by placing a note with a black box symbol in the corresponding Estimate. Because the Main Estimates for 2020-21 will not be available until the autumn, I want to make the Assembly aware that a number of Departments will highlight some functions that will be carried out in 2020-21 under the sole authority of the Budget Act. The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will undertake expenditure on Coastal Communities Fund projects; the Department for Communities will undertake expenditure on welfare reform mitigation; the Department for the Economy will undertake expenditure in support of HMS Caroline as a visitor attraction and support the work of NI Screen; and the Executive Office will undertake expenditure relating to the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse in the Historical Institutional Abuse Act 2019 on the implementation of the Hart report, and on good relations. Details of all functions carried out in 2020-21 under the sole authority of the Budget Act will be highlighted with black boxes in the normal way in the notes to the 2020-21 Main Estimates when they are brought to the Assembly in the autumn.

The legislation is required in order to ensure that public services can continue to be delivered during this COVID-19 response period as we begin to emerge from the lockdown. It will ensure that we can continue to support the health service, businesses and vulnerable people, and I am happy to deal with any points of principle or detail of the Budget Bill that Members may wish to raise.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): Right from the beginning, I declare an interest: I started my naval career a very, very, very long time ago on HMS Caroline.

As we have heard, the Budget (No. 2) Bill provides further statutory authority for expenditure as set out in the Vote on Account, which allows Departments to incur expenditure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic until the Main Estimates are voted on by the Assembly later in the year. Standing Order 42(2) states that accelerated passage may be granted for a Budget Bill, provided that the Committee for Finance is satisfied that it has been appropriately consulted on the public expenditure proposals in the Bill. At the Committee's meeting on 20 May, departmental officials provided oral evidence and answered questions on the Bill being debated today, including on issues relating to a number of Departments. As I pointed out in the debate earlier, the scale of the cumulative changes resulting from our response to the pandemic has been significant, which is why it is necessary for the Bill to pass swiftly to eradicate the risk of Departments running out of money at such a critical time.

We are all operating in circumstances that are out of the ordinary, and that requires us to undertake our work with a degree of flexibility to support the aims that we need to achieve. The Committee is certainly cognisant of that need and welcomes the engagement that it has had from the Department thus far. However, as I said in the debate earlier, our role is to advise, assist and scrutinise the functions of the Department as we navigate through the myriad of issues that we face. Where necessary, the Committee will continue to challenge the Department of Finance as we seek to understand policies that impact on our society, and we will offer suggestions and advice to drive improvements.

At its meeting last week, the Committee was briefed by departmental officials on the background of and necessity for an additional Budget Bill, which, as we all know, is a further measure to assure the continuation of the work of the public sector and of our response to the pandemic. The Committee explored with the officials the rationale for how the amounts specified in the Bill related to departmental spending requirements until the Main Estimates were produced, which, as we have heard, is expected in September, while noting that they had been rounded to the nearest 5%. Members sought and received assurances that those requirements would be sufficient. As the Minister will be aware, we explored the issue of increasing the amount of percentage available to Departments if that is the case. If we end up with a second wave of the pandemic — hopefully, we will not — we may have to be able to look at that.

We now enter a critical phase, the outcome of which will be determined by how we as a society respond to the easing of the necessary measures to allow our lives to return to a more familiar sense of normality. We need to turn our focus to the medium and longer term, with a credible plan that will seek to support our citizens, our businesses and prosperity. I welcome last week's announcement by the Minister of the extension of the rates holiday until 31 July. At last week's meeting, a number of Committee members acknowledged that the Department had, by and large, stepped up to the mark and had listened and responded to the concerns of those who had been adversely impacted on financially by the pandemic. While I acknowledge that the rates holiday offers considerable assurance to the business community, it raises questions around what will happen from August for the businesses that, as many of us MLAs will know, seem to have fallen through the cracks.

While acknowledging the intricacies and the challenges that those questions create, we need to recognise that there are thousands of businesses across Northern Ireland that are not sure that they will be in business in the medium term.

I welcome the Minister's announcement that there will be support on a phased basis, targeted at the sectors that have been hardest hit. To provide certainty, however, we need to understand what proposals are being considered, so that we, as an Assembly, can contribute to and influence how that phased approach will operate. Minister, it would be helpful if, later today in your winding-up speech, you could set out the types of issues being considered as part of the targeted scheme; that is, the level of support and over what period. I ask you to explain the rationale for how the levels of support for the hardest-hit sectors have been prioritised and to provide a commitment to the House that the Committee for Finance will be consulted on the proposals during their formative stages. I also encourage the Minister to encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to expedite the economic recovery plan that we have been promised for at least the past two weeks and that the First Minister stated two weeks ago that we would have presently.

We will also need to take account of the costs associated with such targeted support, because they will be significant. During oral evidence last week, the Committee noted that there was an overcommitment arising from non-domestic rates. While officials were confident that that could be met in-year, we need to ensure that any future support is fully costed and is underpinned by a robust rationale to maximise its impact. We ask the Minister to clarify the extent of the overcommitment. Is he in a position to outline how he intends to meet it in-year? Of course, that all has to be done within a constrained window. It is less than 10 weeks until 31 July. It is therefore critical that businesses be given sufficient time to understand whether they will be affected and, if so, how they will be affected and whether they will fall within the targeted approach.

As the House is aware, the Committee for Finance has a specific function to perform when considering whether a Budget Bill should proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. Engagement by the Department with the Committee has been instrumental in ensuring that the Committee is satisfied that it has been consulted appropriately. It was on that basis that the Committee agreed at its meeting last week that it was content to grant accelerated passage, as provided for in Standing Order 42(2). As you have already stated, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I have written to you on behalf of the Committee to confirm its decision. I say on behalf of the Committee and the Ulster Unionist Party that we support the Bill.

Mr Frew: This is a funny sort of day. The Bill has already had accelerated passage, but we are now going from First Reading to Second Reading within an hour. That is accelerated even for accelerated passage, I think. These are surreal times. My tendency as a scrutiniser is always to put the brake on. Of course, I realise that, in order for me to put the brake on, it is for me to try to get my head around the figures, to scrutinise them and to do the best job that I can of scrutinising them. I know that that is not possible, because of the emergency that we are in and because we need to draw down money quickly.

4.45 pm

I understand the procedure that we are in. I do not like it; I understand it. We are, of course, prepared to accept it, simply because it is a necessity, but I really worry. I really worry about the level of scrutiny that the Chamber and the Committees can give to the budgetary settlements to our Departments and the spends within our Departments. Whilst we should be looking at a Main Estimates booklet very soon, what we have here is a loose number of pages that give us headline figures of what each Department will get. We do not see any real detail on or scrutiny of that in depth. Some Committees will have that. The Finance Committee's members may have a bit more latitude in delving into the figures. Really, to do our job properly, in this forum — in the Assembly — we need to have as much oversight and as much of a panoramic view as possible, and it is just not possible to have that, at this time. That really worries me.

We should be having debates in this place about aligning a Budget with a Programme for Government, but we are not; we cannot. That really worries and concerns me. Let us forget about COVID-19 for one second, please. Some of our public finances are in a very bad place. You hear about infrastructure, the road network and water and sewerage plants holding up the development of homes for our people. Those are big-ticket issues that will tax the most experienced of Assemblies and Governments, and, yet, we have not even got to grips with any of that. We cannot even lift our head up to get to grips with any of that because we are still dealing with the COVID-19 emergency.

I fear for the future with regards to what this place can achieve in trying to answer the big-ticket questions for society. That really worries me, but what also worries me is the level of detail that gets down to our Committees. It strikes me that our last line of defence is the Committee structure. The Committee members are there to get right down into the detail of their Committee's particular Department, and they can do that only through the information that they receive from the Department. That really concerns me because, while some Departments are better than others, not all Departments are giving out that information.

I have the blessing that I sit on the Committee for Finance and that gives me a bit of an overall umbrella approach and panoramic view. I also sit on the Justice Committee. Members will have been in the Chamber when the Chairman of the Justice Committee raised his concerns — he did so in a manner that was robust but timely, right and appropriate — about the Justice Department giving information to the Justice Committee. It is deeply disturbing and totally unacceptable that the Department failed to provide information on a range of high-profile matters, categorised as other significant pressures, particularly given that no other Department left pressures uncoded in the templates completed for their respective Committees.

Most Members may not know this, but the Committee for Finance, through the RaISe office, pushed through a template — a uniform document — to all Committees, to get answers from Departments. That is the way to go. It is the way to make sure that we get consistent information down to our Committees, so that we can look at things in a comparative way. It is a very good exercise, and I believe in it. What it has done already is to shine a light on the information that Departments are not giving us. In this case, that is the Department of Justice. I have

been aware of that because I sit on the two Committees. The Justice Department had submitted responses to information requests from the Department of Finance and had provided details of costs that were identified across the justice system. However, it did not inform the Justice Committee of the amount of the bid that had been submitted to manage pressures resulting from the pandemic, which was £38.8 million. It did not provide the Justice Committee with any information on the breakdown of the COVID-19 resource requirements that were submitted to the Department of Finance.

That is unacceptable in this day and age, when we have come back to this place, when we cannot have business as usual and when we can have no hidden things in this place. It is totally and utterly unacceptable that Departments would withhold that information from Committees — the very scrutiny Committees that are designed to assist the Department and the Minister. It is unacceptable that we would not have sight of that. The details of the £38.8 million were, instead, provided to the Finance Committee, on which I sit, by the Department of Finance. The details highlight the inclusion of an estimated pressure of £0.9 million for the legal aid COVID-19 interim payment scheme. We are not talking about big money, but that is not the point. It is £0.9 million but it may as well be £9 million or £90 million; it is about the fact that the Department of Justice did not give that information to the Committee for Justice.

That was, in fact, in direct contradiction to the information that had been provided to the Committee in the Department's policy paper on the payments scheme. That paper advised that the costs associated with the scheme would be administered from the existing legal aid budget and gave no indication that a bid for that pressure had been submitted. Here we have a Minister and a Department that, granted, have to think quickly because it is a COVID-19 issue, not even thinking it right to give the Committee that information or, at least, being blasé about it. Is it not good that we have the structure whereby the Department of Finance gives that information to the Finance Committee which, then, can be passed back to the Justice Committee? That, however, is a very convoluted way of doing business, and I do not like it.

That is one case that I have picked up on but there are probably many others that Members will have to pick up from their Departments. That issue needs to have a light shone on it and it needs to be taken further because we have to get to a place where we, as individual MLAs, and the Assembly are treated with respect. If we are not getting the information that we require, that is not treating Committees and MLAs with respect but with disdain, and that cannot happen. That has to be completely removed from this place. There can be no more business as usual. We are in a different place, where decisions have to be made. Let us see those decisions being played out and let us have full scrutiny of them.

I made a point earlier and I ask the Minister to forgive me, but I need to make it again. Maybe it is just the way that my mind works, but, in the previous debate on the Vote on Account, the Minister said that the Utility Regulator for Northern Ireland had received 90% of its funding for this year. I am not saying that that is wrong; what I am saying is that I cannot see that in any of this detail. Maybe I am looking at the figures wrongly but what I see is two

schedules. There are two schedules to the Budget Bill but not once do they mention the Utility Regulator. I think that that is because it is not getting any more money in this Vote on Account. I could be wrong, but I am putting it out there.

What I see is that in table 1 in the Vote on Account relating to resources, the Utility Regulator has received only 45% of its yearly spend and is still without some £144,000, having received £119,000. The second table is about cash, and we are talking about a figure of £1.3 million, of which it has received £330,000. If my maths is right, that is about 25%. I am not saying that the Utility Regulator needs more money, but I am asking: why we would not give the Utility Regulator more money? It is the only body that does not receive money and the only body that is not mentioned in the Bill. We are allowing latitude for the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Those bodies do not even need money for COVID-19, but, like the Departments, they are being allowed to get more of their money through the Vote on Account. The only office that is not is the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator. I know that it is funded differently and that none of the bodies that I listed are funded identically or do the same work, but it seems strange to me that you would not afford the Utility Regulator all that money in case it needs it before the Main Estimates come in September. The Minister stated earlier that it has received 90%. That could be the case, but I cannot see it in either the Bill or the Vote on Account, and I would like him to go over it one more time for me. I might be wrong. I certainly do not understand it and I would like him to clarify that position for me.

We have heard today, as we hear every day when we talk about budgets, about the pressures on our system, on our infrastructure, on our communities and our education and health systems. If we were to list all the pressures and all the wants, needs and requirements, we could probably spend our Budget four times over, but we cannot because there is not enough money there. I want to see not only the money that we need to spend but the money that we will save. This is not the time to push forward with projects that Ministers may want. This is the time for necessity and the time for hard-knuckled maths to get us back down to necessity and to make sure that the money that is spent by the Executive caters for all our people and not just some of them. There will be vulnerabilities among our people that need to be accounted for, and that is totally and utterly acceptable, but other things may be able to wait. We may be able to wait until we see what the climate looks like after this event, to see how the economy is performing and how it has recovered, to see what money we have got through taxes, Barnett consequentials and the block grant and then move forward from there.

As my colleague mentioned earlier, there is a necessity for police officers, but that pressure is not being met because we have a raft of other things to spend on. That raft of things that we are spending money on has always been there. Are those things needed? There is surely something in each Department that does not require the money, the funding and the spend. It may be because of COVID-19. It may be because we are doing things differently. It may be because it was not really a good thing to do in the first place. We should be progressing our thought processes and saying, "Let us do something differently because it is more effective and efficient and we will save money". That is the sort of debate that I want to have in the Chamber.

I do not want to have a debate about a list of pressures but one about having the foresight and the imagination to make sure that the public pound goes as far as it can and to ensure that what we are spending it on is exactly what we need and will help to raise money or help people to raise money in the future. That is what I want to see the money invested in. I want to see it invested, not spent. That could be invested in people, in business or enterprise, but, ultimately, we have to look through all of that.

Some Departments would have run out of money had we not voted for the Vote on Account this morning, but can we really say that those Departments are saying, "Here is what we will save, here is where we will cut back and here is why we need to do that"?

That is a vacuum and space in the debate. I suppose that it has always been missing from our Budget debates. Maybe it would be different if we got to a strategic three-year Budget; maybe it would be different if we could align the Programme for Government with the Budget, because that would justify every Budget stream to a Programme for Government output. Maybe that is where we need to get to, but we are not there yet, and that troubles me; it worries me.

5.00 pm

It is a necessity that we do this. We have to wait for the Main Estimates in September, but the Finance Committee was looking forward to the draft Budget for the next year in September. Where is that? Can the Minister enlighten us as to whether a body of work is ongoing to draft that Budget, because that should be going out to consultation? Work on that Budget should be going on now, but we are having to go through this process. It is not their fault; it is not the Minister's fault that we are in this COVID-19 situation. We need to step forward in a strategic fashion. We need to see the draft Budget for the next financial year, in September, so that we can scrutinise it. However, by that time, we will be looking at the Main Estimates for this Budget. You can see how messy that is going to be and how easy it is going to be to miss things when scrutinising it. That is not the place that any one of us wants to be. Every pound that we spend has to be accounted for. It does not matter whether it is the £0.9 million that the Justice Committee has found out about in respect of the Justice Department. As I said earlier, that may as well be £9 million, £90 million or £900 million. It is about accountability and transparency, and the scrutiny of this place doing its job, and we are being prevented from doing that when we do not receive all the information from the Departments. That worries me, Mr Deputy Principal Speaker.

Mr Lynch: I am glad that the Member who has just spoken said that it was not the Minister's fault that we were in the COVID situation. He usually blames him for everything else.

I want to make a few points rather than repeat what I said this morning. I commend the Minister for getting tens of millions out the door in these unique circumstances to save and protect livelihoods, wages and businesses. In normal circumstances, that would take six months, with planning, consultations etc, but we are not in normal circumstances. The Minister said that he will, hopefully, bring a Budget to the Assembly in the autumn.

The Committee agreed for this additional Budget in these unique circumstances, and it agreed why it was needed

and why accelerated passage was required. It will allow Departments to function over the coming months, and public services to be funded. In that context, I support the Bill.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Perhaps, we should have a debate on whether your title is Principal Deputy Speaker or Deputy Principal Speaker, because one of the few things that unites us in the House is that we do not know which it is. *[Laughter.]* I think it is Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I was concerned that the Member was going to say that one of the few things that unites us in the House is contempt for the Principal Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Toole: Not at all, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

We are debating the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Given the nature of our proceedings, we are at risk of repeating everything that we said a few hours ago. I will try not to repeat everything that I said a few hours ago. I have some humane instinct in relation to the Finance Minister. I know that he is not solely responsible for the COVID-19 crisis; I do not hold him responsible for everything. I know that he has had to sit through several long debates on the Bill, so I will not repeat everything that I said before. I will give a few broader thoughts in relation to the Budget (No. 2) Bill, our budgeting processes and our longer-term fiscal position, which is something that I have laboured on in the Assembly before, but it is important.

A few days ago, in the Chamber, the Education Minister repeated one of the great clichés about this place: Winston Churchill saying, after the First World War that, after the waters of the war had subsided:

"the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again",

still left with their eternal quarrel. We obviously have not quite moved on from that quarrel yet. Thankfully, we are in this Chamber debating it, but it is true that, as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis — we will not fully emerge from it for a while, although it is worth putting on record that we have some cautiously good news in Northern Ireland today, about the numbers of fatalities; we are, hopefully, turning a corner in that sense and we had good news from the Republic yesterday — it is extremely important that we use the opportunity to take a long calm look at our priorities as a region and an Executive.

Given the nature of our budgeting processes, the fundamental thing about how we budget is that we are given a block grant. The overwhelming majority of money that is spent by the Executive is given to it. Whether you regard that as an act of beneficence and generosity, or something that is the product of the Northern Ireland taxpayers contributing to the Exchequer, that is how we are funded. The primary strategic tool that we have, as an Executive and Assembly, is the disbursement of money, which is what the Finance Minister is talking to us about. That is why it is completely critical that that budgeting process is linked into, as Paul Frew mentioned, a set of Programme for Government targets. It is understandable that we do not have a completely agreed set of Programme for Government targets, because we had three years off. However, we are now past time to have a joined-up strategy from the Executive. I appreciate that, as the Finance Minister said in his earlier remarks, my party is

in the Executive. I do not seek to cast blame in this, but to talk about the importance of us all contributing to the debate. That is what I am trying to do.

We need to use the emergence from the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to look at our long-term fiscal position, and long-term goals as a society. One of the interesting things about Northern Ireland's fiscal position is that, in a sense, it does not really matter what your constitutional preference is. That might seem like an absurd statement. We heard various people standing and talking, from different constitutional perspectives, about their interpretation of Northern Ireland's fiscal position vis-à-vis the UK Exchequer. However, in a strange way, my view is that, actually, something that people who have different constitutional perspectives can agree on is that it is better for this place to be more able to raise its own revenue and spend money that is generated here. That would be good for our society and economy.

How do we get there? Part of how we get there — unfortunately, we have not been able to debate it yet since the institutions returned — is the creation of some kind of long-term fiscal commission. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document talks about a "fiscal council", which has the vibe of a Treasury overseeing body. That would not, necessarily, be ideal in some ways. We really need to see, in addition to the fiscal council or working with it, a fiscal commission that looks at our long-term fiscal position in Northern Ireland: how we can possibly look for new ways of raising revenue, in a way that is broader-based than we have at present.

One of the lessons from this crisis is that our singular means of revenue raising is non-domestic rates, and that is the single most damaging taxation on the sectors of the economy that are hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis. I say this as a centre-left social democrat, who believes in revenue raising and in businesses paying their fair share of tax. The bald truth is that that particular tax weighs heaviest on independent retail and hospitality, which are the sectors that, we all know, have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis. So, it is really important that, while we pass this Budget(No. 2) Bill — I and my party support it — we move at speed towards delivering on the fiscal council, which is set out in New Decade, New Approach, but also the fiscal commission that has been mooted by others, including the Minister, so that we can sit down and have a long-term look at our revenue-raising potential and social and economic priorities.

In addition to that, and in the short term, I would like the Minister to look at reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing powers. We have not had a chance to address long-term structural challenges in the economy. We will have to address them at some point. I hope that when the Economy Minister brings forward her plan, it will address those issues in the context of COVID-19. They include, but are not limited to, long-term structural productivity issues; a low skills base; and the problem of outward migration, either to go to university or afterwards, among young people who do not come back. We need to address those issues. In the short term, can we make use of borrowing powers when, as I said earlier, borrowing costs through the UK Public Works Loan Board are extremely low in order to start to make some of those long-term capital investments?

While I support the Budget (No. 2) Bill, I reiterate what I said earlier: we really need to see a joined-up economic and fiscal plan. I do not say that to carp at or criticise the Minister, but because we all have a responsibility to focus on that. I will say one final, tiny thing, and do what I have slightly had a dig at other people for doing with regard to particular spending pressures: one small, discrete area of spending that would not cost the earth but would be extremely beneficial to us all and to society and communities would be to protect local media. I have written to the Minister about that. A comparatively small amount of money — we are talking in the very low single millions of pounds; about as low as you could get in the seven figures — would really help to protect those community assets. Frankly, many communities would be lost without them. I think that I will leave it at that for now.

Mr Muir: I must declare at the outset that I also have a link with HMS Caroline. Mr Aiken, I will explain that to you some other time. *[Laughter.]* I thank the Minister for his statement. I thank the officials who, I know, are doing a very difficult job in extremely challenging circumstances. It seems a long time ago that the Finance Minister made an announcement to the Chamber on 31 March.

My party supports the Budget. It is not perfect, but the fundamental role of a Government is to set a Budget. We must step up to the challenge to enable continued delivery of public services. My party welcomes the increases in resource and capital funding. They come after years of austerity measures from Westminster, which, following the financial crisis, caused real damage to public services and hit vulnerable people the hardest. With the economic downturn that arises from the COVID-19 crisis likely to be much worse than that of 2007 onwards, we cannot allow the same mistakes to be repeated.

My party also welcomes the additional, albeit very limited, funding that has come from New Decade, New Approach. That funding was conditional on fundamental governance reforms in the Assembly and Executive, as some Members have mentioned. The shortfalls were brutally laid out in the RHI report, which we debated in this place at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. All parties must remember that a failure to live up to the commitments and spirit of New Decade, New Approach could lead to very real consequences for people here.

I recognise the resource pressures that have been upon officials in recent times. The establishment of the fiscal council, which was referenced by Matthew O'Toole, must, therefore, be progressed. I would appreciate an update from the Minister on the establishment of the fiscal council.

We are all very well aware that the Budget has been totally overshadowed by COVID-19. I broadly support the financial decisions that the Executive have taken thus far. There will be a time to examine the value for money of measures that have been taken — the PAC has scheduled business on that tomorrow — but those measures have been taken with good justification. I particularly support the package of targeted rates relief that was announced last week. However, there are still people and businesses for whom the Executive must do much more, such as sole traders, many of whom have been excluded from the recent grant measures.

Tuning to the year ahead, the ginormous financial challenges that we face are, to a large degree, beyond

the Executive's control. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has already led to over 26,000 people losing their jobs locally in Northern Ireland. That figure is taken from the recent unemployed claimant counts. That is compounded by the fact that, I fear, the worst is yet to come. Furthermore, as the UK Government seem unlikely to secure a trade deal with the EU, the potential consequences of no deal for Northern Ireland are severe. Today, I have received correspondence from the Economy Minister, which states:

“My Department is very conscious of the potential for an increase in redundancies, and has already put arrangements in place to take into account the possibility of an increase in demand following EU exit”.

How anyone can sell EU exit as a benefit when we are getting correspondence about an increase in the demand for redundancies is beyond me.

5.15 pm

There are, however, a number of important steps that the Executive can take as we face these deeply challenging and uncertain times. The right response from the Executive could prove to be the difference between a short recession and a long depression, with an impact on hundreds and thousands of our citizens.

The Executive need to ensure that their financial response to COVID-19 is coordinated and strategic. The steps thus far have focused on the emergency response and on safeguarding businesses and front-line public services. Going forward, the focus must switch to stimulating a sustainable recovery, protecting public services and safeguarding people's jobs and incomes. I acknowledge the progress that has been made to date, which is outlined by the Finance Minister in the paper on the economic recovery that is to be considered by the Executive on Thursday. It is important that the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy come together with a robust and ambitious stimulus package to help Northern Ireland adapt to the new normal. That should include the establishment of an economic task force that brings together the strongest voices across government, business, trade unions and the third sector in supporting decision-making: a social-partnership approach to recovery.

Policy interventions must target the most economically and socially significant sectors. Providing reskilling, training and employment opportunities for our workforce should also be at the centre of this strategy, with a particular focus on young people, who look set to be the worst hit by the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Having the right strategy in place is one thing, but we must also ensure that we have the money to see it through. Money that is dedicated to saving businesses today will not be well spent if we cannot provide the support that is required to ensure that those businesses and their employees can adapt to the new normal.

Additionally, we need to ensure that capital projects, which will be vital to stimulating our economy in the short and the long term, can go ahead. Research from the University of Oxford has shown that green capital investments are the most effective in the short and the long term for a sustainable green recovery. At this point, I should declare

that I was previously a member of Ards and North Down Borough Council and an employee of Translink.

Existing infrastructure plans, such as the Belfast transport hub, investment in electric and hydrogen transport and the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry railway line must be pushed forward apace. Funding should also be made available for active travel, where the Executive are badly missing their own targets. The Executive must also have a list of shovel-ready projects that can be put to work as soon as funding is made available. Redirecting budgets from capital to resource should be the last, not the first, course of action considered by Departments.

While lobbying Westminster for additional funding is important, the Executive should also make better use of their own borrowing powers, as Matthew O'Toole outlined. None of those are currently planned, including the utilisation of financial transactions capital, although I note that that is being planned.

Again, and finally, on infrastructure, the Executive must push ahead with their own plans for reforms to procurement and learn the lessons set out in the Northern Ireland Audit Office's 2019 report on major capital projects. We also must ensure that our planning system is fit for purpose. The average time of 260 weeks taken by the Department for Infrastructure to determine a planning application in 2018-19 just is not acceptable, never mind the longest period of 556 weeks. The need to undertake the long-awaited strategic review of planning and to establish a regional infrastructure panel or commission to identify and rapidly progress the most significant long-term infrastructure projects is clear, alongside a new infrastructure plan informed by advice from the panel or commission.

The other area where the Executive can make a difference is in public-sector reform. My party has for years called for the Executive to tackle the cost of division, where every penny that we waste could instead be better spent supporting citizens and communities.

We cannot blame austerity for all our budgetary problems. Having seen how much we rely on the NHS during this pandemic, we must push ahead with the reforms laid out in Bengoa. A patient-centred approach focused on systems, not structures, is vital. When it comes to new working practices, remote and flexible working arrangements have become the standard through COVID-19. The public sector should stand at the forefront of these changes and have the technology to be able to do so.

It is to be welcomed that, once again, budgetary decisions that affect the people of Northern Ireland are being taken by local politicians who are accountable to them. The Executive have an immense responsibility to our community to steer our economy into the new normal and protect the health and livelihoods of our people. The Budget, and all our financial decisions, should be centred on that goal.

Mr Buckley: It is fair to say that our deliberations today on the Budget Bill and the Supply resolution have been riddled by the word “coronavirus”. It is in that light that I mark in the House that today has been the first day since 18 March when we have had no confirmed COVID-related deaths in Northern Ireland. There have been many dark days in this Chamber, but this is a chink of light, hopefully, towards the end of a long dark tunnel.

I pay tribute to the many healthcare workers in the NHS, our care homes, other health professionals and key workers who have helped achieve this goal. All of us in this House can bear testimony to what has happened over the course of the last few months and how we have sought to deal with the emergency of our lifetime. That sets the context of what we are dealing with here today.

Coronavirus has had a significant impact on this Budget. I listened in to the Finance Committee and other Members have stated that if we do not act, and act now, five Departments will run out of money by July if further allocations are not given. Those stark statistics prove the point about where we are today and the reasons why.

In February, after three years of silence in this Chamber, I was able to speak on a Budget debate in my maiden speech. I recall how I did so with the optimism that, after three years of shameful inactivity, this House was finally getting to grips with the issues that mattered to the Northern Ireland public, whether unionist, nationalist or other. In that contribution, I mentioned health, education and the economy. All three of those issues are in an even worse state today and will be after this pandemic, given the significant financial shortcomings that we have heard about from the Minister and the Departments.

As was mentioned by Mr Frew, there has been little chance for Committees and this Chamber to scrutinise Budget allocations. I know where we are in the time process — this has to happen urgently in order to get money through the door to those in need. However, I want to highlight some key issues about departmental budgets that deserve further scrutiny.

First, I want to talk about the Health budget. Prior to COVID-19, there were some 420,000 people on waiting lists in Northern Ireland. We had heard about the severe pressures that the system was facing. COVID-19 came and the health service was — rightly — given a priority status in order to protect life and save our NHS. In doing so, we demonstrated the ability to focus minds on the problem at hand. However, as we emerge from this crisis my fear is that the 420,000 on the waiting list has been exacerbated. In many cases, treatment has been delayed and put on hold. There has been a dramatic reduction in cancer referrals and, inevitably, sadly cancer will go undiagnosed in many of our constituents.

In recognising the Executive's allocation for the Department of Health's COVID-19 pressures, maybe the Minister would elaborate on what actions are being taken to address the cost of displacing many vital cancer services at this time, because that is where the priority will have to shift to in the days ahead.

I also mentioned in my maiden speech on the Budget Bill the severe plight in Northern Ireland around mental health. There can be no doubt in anyone's mind in this House, that mental health was a severe crisis facing us all. I believed that, upon the restoration of the Assembly, there was unanimity in the House to try to help those who are suffering from mental health. I think that is a fair comment. I listened to speeches right across the House and there was a unanimity of purpose and a collectivity of how we could deal with it. Members were focussed on the job at hand. Sadly, again, with COVID-19 and the need for people to stay at home and in social isolation, anxiety levels are now higher than ever. People across this country

are battling with loneliness and depression and it will be up to this Assembly, and our Executive colleagues, to pick up the pieces. I hope that budget allocations, including to the Department of Health, are made with these particular causes in mind. The mental health crisis in Northern Ireland pre-existed this viral pandemic and there is a real threat that this emergency will be compounded by COVID-19; we need to be prepared for that.

With regard to our economy, I mentioned in my original Budget speech how, after restoration, we could finally meet the needs of businesses who were crying out for support and help after the Executive and this Assembly had let them down by inactivity and absence. During COVID-19, it is fair to say that Government has, by and large, stepped up to the mark to help businesses. It is important to point out the rates relief scheme because that is a lifeline for businesses and the extension of that will help them in the post-COVID-19 recovery. We also must bear testimony that many have fallen through the cracks and we as Members will be left to pick up the pieces and rebuild those businesses and jobs in our constituencies.

While many sectors have received financial support and help, I am concerned about the hauliers and the support for those who are maintaining food security across Northern Ireland; that has already been mentioned. They are key workers who, sadly, have been let down by this place around COVID-19. I hope that consideration is given through Budget allocations etc, to giving them the much-needed support to see them through this difficult time. We have all heard the horror stories of freight transport going to the UK mainland and coming back, many times, with empty loads. That is simply unsustainable. They need help — urgent help.

There was a thread throughout many of the speeches in the first Budget debate after the three-year suspension of this place that things cannot continue as normal. We hear it here again; things cannot continue as normal.

I listened to Mr Carroll's contribution on the Supply resolution when he talked about, and criticised, the Assembly for looking at creative ways to bring revenue into Northern Ireland and, in particular, the corporation tax cut. It cannot be the case where it is take, take, take and spend, spend, spend in Northern Ireland. We must be creative and look at ways in which we can raise revenue. If you think about it, Northern Ireland fell victim to this because, as Mr Muir mentioned a couple of minutes ago, of the 26,000 jobs that have already been lost to the Northern Ireland economy with, potentially, worse coming in the COVID-19 response —.

Mr O'Toole: I appreciate the honourable Member giving way. He mentioned corporation tax and the need to raise revenue. If he is talking about the policy of reduced corporation tax in Northern Ireland, does he accept that that would mean less revenue to spend here rather than more?

5.30 pm

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am trying to say that the spin-off of reduced corporation tax would give Northern Ireland businesses the potential to attract a level of inward investment that they have never been able to attract before. Why? Those international businesses look to the Republic of Ireland with its lower

corporation tax. It has capitalised on our restricted ability to lower corporation tax. We have to look at those creative measures and collectively start to think about how we can do things differently in this place to ensure that international business can, once again, come to our shores and look at Northern Ireland's people, the place and its assets — its great strength — and put the economy back on its feet. That is what all of us will have to do. It will be all hands on deck to ensure a post-COVID recovery, and budget allocations by the Minister, other Ministers and the Executive will be crucial.

I want to comment briefly on infrastructure. In earlier debates, we heard how infrastructure and capital projects would be vital in maintaining the construction sector in Northern Ireland, which plays such a significant role. From a public transport perspective, the customer base has collapsed and been devastated by COVID-19, and it shows no early signs of recovery given the need to socially distance.

The potential savings to Departments from COVID-19 have been mentioned. There must be some out there, because we have heard about how services cannot operate in the same fashion because of the nature of the social restrictions with which we are living. I have heard horror stories of how, for example, trains are running to Dublin and other places at the cost of thousands of pounds to the taxpayer, with as few as three, four or five customers. That cannot continue. Ministers must use that vital resource in a manner that protects the public purse.

I also want to mention the Committee that I serve on: the Committee for Communities. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how the Department for Communities has been able to allocate resources to some constituents who are most in need. Again, there are shortcomings, and I look at the charities sector, for example. With funding allocated via the Budget for COVID-19 pressures and a rescue package for charities, many will miss the boat and slip through the cracks, yet they perform vital, life-saving roles in our communities at this time. We need to look at how we can better support them through it.

I also want to focus on an issue that, I know, many Members have been engaged on: relief and support packages for sporting clubs. The sports hardship fund, which, if awarded, allocated up to a maximum of £2,000 per club to help fight the pressures that they faced as a result of COVID-19. It is a lifeline to keep many of those sporting clubs alive, and the need for it will continue. That support can be given across all sporting fraternities, and it is important that we fight for equality of treatment for all sporting clubs to ensure that they can access some form of funding. My fear, which was highlighted by the fact that the fund was closed within two days, is that the funding that was allocated is simply not enough to meet the need. My contribution will be in Hansard, and I have no doubt that it can be reported to the Communities Minister. Her Department should look at something like the sports hardship fund, a resource allocation that can help save many clubs that, potentially, face no return after the pandemic, given how long it may last.

Our Budget debate today and Members' contributions must focus on one word: "prioritisation". We have all mentioned it, and it is easy to talk about our hobby horses in the Chamber when it comes to constituency projects. We have

all been guilty of it, but the issues that I mentioned today are real priorities for us all, collectively, in Northern Ireland to try to create post-COVID economic conditions that will see the rising tide lift all boats in Northern Ireland plc.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I have to say that I did not know that there was ambiguity about your title.

It is only three weeks since I spoke on behalf of the Committee for the Economy in the 2020-21 Budget debate, on 5 May. As so many Members have said and, I suspect, will be saying for some time to come, we live in exceptional times and can no longer apply the rule book to which we have referred for so long. The Economy Committee finds itself at the heart of scrutinising measures put in place by the Economy Minister and her Executive colleagues, including the Finance Minister. The Committee's position is, in some ways, unique among Statutory Committees in that we can see and hear first-hand evidence of the economic devastation that the human tragedy that is the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it. However, members have been heartened by the evidence that we have received from a range of bodies and organisations highlighting how, in recovering and rebuilding our economy and society, we can create new and better ways of doing things. The Committee has been hugely impressed and deeply humbled that, while organisations come to brief members on the issues faced by their sector, they are also designing and sharing visions of how we can move on and improve. There is little self-pity, and that is a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of our people.

The Committee believes that the newer, better way of doing things should reflect the lessons that we have learned from the terrible blight of COVID-19. We must build in a way that respects our planet and makes better and safer use of our resources. That will mean investing in new green industries and jobs. It will mean building and capitalising on the local community efforts that have got us through the crisis. Localisation where possible, rather than globalisation at all costs, must guide us. Our communities have shown themselves to be resourceful and innovative, businesses have been repurposed, and social enterprise is clearly the way forward in so many sectors and for so many businesses.

The Committee understands that the Budget envelope that the Executive have at their disposal is finite. However, members have heard from so many stakeholders how we can and should pay it better and in a more sustainable way. The Committee advocates on behalf of its extensive stakeholder base that the Executive apply their Budget in a creative way. The Committee urges the Executive to listen to the advice of the bodies, organisations and individuals who have the expertise to take our economy and society forward. Let us emerge from this dark time to a new economy, where we take the lessons we have learned and budget accordingly.

Budget scrutiny at this point remains difficult, as I said on 5 May. The Committee remains extremely supportive of the Department and the Executive's COVID-19 response, and members will continue to advise on gaps and issues, as well as ideas and solutions, going forward.

The Committee continues to stand ready to scrutinise the Department's budget as and when there is greater detail

and certainty. It remains the Committee's view that the Department for the Economy must have its budgetary needs prioritised. The Committee looks forward to the outcome of the June monitoring round to better assess the budget position for the Department. At the same time, the Committee continues to consider the impact of Brexit and the impact of the protocol on the local economy. That still requires significant budgetary support.

I will now make a few remarks in my capacity as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. Like others, I will try not to repeat myself but speak in broader terms about the Budget, because we all recognise the difficulty in trying to finalise a Budget in the current context. Our Budget was already under pressure prior to this unprecedented crisis, particularly after the British Government reneged on some of their financial commitments in the context of the New Decade, New Approach agreement. Those challenges remain, and we must collectively continue to make the argument for investment in our public services, public services that have been vital in recent weeks and that have been stripped bare following a decade of austerity. The role of the essential workers who provide those public services must also be recognised, and never again should we hear disgraceful talk about how some of them are low skilled.

I agree with Mr Muir's comments that, in the weeks ahead, as we plan for economic and societal recovery and allocate budgets to Departments to support that, there needs to be a coordinated, strategic and collaborative approach. It is my belief that we must do that according to a set of core principles that enshrine workers' rights and reverse the trend towards precarious working in zero-hours contracts, and we must build on the new ways of working that we have all had to adopt in a very short time. Remote and flexible working that can enhance work-life balance is more environmentally friendly in that it reduces commuting, and it promotes regional balance by having people in their own community more often. That will obviously require investment in digital infrastructure and other infrastructure to support remote working. We must ensure that decarbonisation is one of the core tenets of the recovery and that we build on the sectors that have been able to expand during the crisis, as well as supporting other sectors to recover. Skills development must be part of that.

There were a number of progressive commitments and principles agreed to in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, including directing resources on the basis of need and tackling regional imbalance. They must guide our investment in the time ahead. A green new deal was also committed to, as other Members have said. It would be shameful not to ensure that our recovery also addressed the climate and biodiversity crises. We must harness the potential of our island by investing in green skills development and infrastructure to tackle structural inequalities as well as the climate emergency. We need to look at how we can address multiple priorities and strategic outcomes. The Minister has talked about how he has asked Departments to look at their capital programmes. Government can certainly play an important role in stimulating the construction sector and the local economy through major capital builds. There are projects like Magee medical school, Casement Park and renewable energy projects that should be expedited.

There are already conversations happening and concerns being expressed about how we will pay for the pandemic. It

is a topic that Governments around the world are grappling with. This is an extraordinary crisis brought about by a health emergency; it must have an extraordinary response. One thing that is absolutely certain is that we cannot have a return to austerity in the aftermath of this; that would simply compound the disaster. One suggestion that I make — I have written to the British Chancellor on this, and perhaps the Minister could also take it up — is to tighten up tax loopholes so that big companies and the super-rich pay their way. Many of them have benefited from the Government's unprecedented interventions, so they should pay their way in the time ahead. Companies that have benefited from the crisis with increased profits and share prices should be subject to a windfall tax. The revenue generated could be directed to support our vital public services.

Suddenly switching off the funding for interventions like the job retention scheme would result in huge numbers of redundancies. Quite simply, it would mean that the interventions to date had been in vain. Further financial and fiscal stimulus is the only way to bring about an economic recovery in the shorter rather than longer term. The British Government must recognise that. We, as an Executive and Assembly, must collectively, together with civic society, business organisations, academia, the community and voluntary sector and trade unions, make the case for the support that our local economy needs. We must continue to look at how we, as an island, can recover by investing in and supporting our local supply chains. The fragility of global supply chains and of relying too heavily on imports has been exposed in recent weeks. There is a potential to be more self-sufficient across the island, and we must grasp it. We have seen how quickly some businesses have repurposed to produce vital personal protective equipment (PPE), for example, and they must be commended for those efforts. We must support other businesses to be innovative. I agree with Mr O'Toole's comments on fiscal powers; I always agree with him when he makes that point. We should continue to argue for the devolution of further fiscal powers. I know that the Finance Minister has talked about setting up a commission, and that should be factored into our recovery plans.

In bringing my comments to a close as economy spokesperson, I must mention the huge concern that remains on our immediate horizon: Brexit and the continuing negotiations. It is vital that the British Government provide further details on how they intend to implement the protocol as a matter of urgency. However, it is also clear that the clock is ticking down quickly towards the end of June. There is much to do both practically and legislatively in relation to that as yet uncertain outcome. An extension to the deadline is the only sensible option at this point.

Let us face it: the pandemic and our experience of it has changed all of us individually and as a society. Those experiences must shape our economy and society for the better, building on our resilience and solidarity as a community. I support the Bill.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. These have been incredibly challenging times for us all. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone across Northern Ireland. It is vital that we all play our part in the recovery and rebuilding process. Our economy faces a very difficult

period, and there are serious financial challenges for every Executive Department, going forward.

5.45 pm

Significant financial support measures have been put in place — it is important that we recognise it — to support our local economy. I commend the work of the Executive, including our Finance Minister and, of course, our Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, who has recognised the challenges. They have all fought for and supported as many sectors as possible with the finite resources available to them. The measures include the £10,000 grant scheme, for which over 20,000 payments worth £194 million have been issued; the £25,000 grant scheme; the self-employed income support scheme; the job retention furlough scheme; and the recently announced microbusiness hardship fund. Of course, the various bank lending schemes are also welcome as is the rate relief scheme, especially for businesses. Further clarification is required on who the business relief scheme applies to, as I continue to have enquiries from my constituents on that. The agriculture, farming and fisheries support schemes have also been instrumental in supporting our local economy through these difficult days.

We have benefited from one of the best economic rescue packages in the world. Being part of our United Kingdom and through our Executive, we have been able to do what is best for Northern Ireland. As we look forward to life after lockdown, we must work with our business sector to support it in the days ahead. I know many businesses are keen to hear about when, as part of the next steps, they can reopen their doors. We have seen the Prime Minister outline the next steps for allowing non-essential retail stores to open from 15 June in England. Our Executive will continue to be guided by the scientific and medical advice on when that can be done here safely. There is a desire for clarity and certainty and for hope through the next small steps on our road to recovery and in doing what is right for the people of Northern Ireland.

The step 1 announcement last week was a welcome development for many and was the first major step forward on our journey to recovery, with the lifting of a range of lockdown restrictions. It is important that the Executive prioritise support for our manufacturing sector to return to business in a safe and hygienic manner whilst retaining high standards. That will involve internal restructuring for many and revising production processes, which will have a significant impact on production capability, with reduced staffing levels and resources. Remaining competitive and cost-effective will be a major challenge for our local manufacturing sector as it endeavours to compete globally.

Our hospitality, retail, leisure and tourism sectors, including our hotels, also need continued support on the road to recovery. Many hotels continue to lie empty, including the Culloden Estate and Spa, Clandeboye Lodge Hotel and the Marine Court Hotel in my constituency. Whilst there are many challenges ahead, there are opportunities, not least for our tourism sector. We must tap into the demand for holidaying at home in Northern Ireland this year and in the years ahead, helping to support and rebuild our local economy whilst we live with the ongoing challenges that COVID-19 presents. The promotion of holidaying at home needs support from Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland. We should look at the promotion of event

tourism once again in the near future because it has been so successful in showcasing the very best of Northern Ireland on the world stage.

Our town centres will also need support in the days ahead, as we are all very aware, as they reopen their doors on a phased basis. We need to encourage local people back into our towns, cities and villages across Northern Ireland. Buying and supporting local is crucial for our recovery and for our local economy to rebuild and gain confidence. Our councils, as we have heard today, are keen to continue building on relationships with central government in helping to stimulate the market in our town centres as places to visit and do business. The Economy Committee, as its Chair has mentioned, has engaged with a wide range of sectors over recent weeks and months, and, as recently as this morning, we had a session with Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) representatives from our councils who rightly recognise the challenges for upskilling and developing our people to face the challenges of unemployment and a lack of opportunities, including for our young people, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. We also recognise the need for support for our universities and our colleges, going forward. That is vital, as we want to retain our skilled and ambitious young people for the future.

There is no doubt that there are many challenges ahead for our country and for our Executive, not least financially, as we have been reminded in the Budget debate today, but I believe that there are opportunities and that we must all play our part in supporting our recovery through the five-step plan and beyond.

Mr Gildernew: I just want to say a few words, and I do not propose to repeat my remarks from earlier. Before I start, I declare an interest in relation to my role previously as a social worker, from which I am still on a career break. Also, my wife is a nurse in the community.

I have found the debate very interesting in its frequent references to austerity. Never has the saying “Austerity costs lives” been writ as large as it has at this time. In relation to the remarks earlier that we should somehow be grateful for what we receive from across the water and things like that, I bring Members back to the start of the pandemic, as we watched it coming across the globe towards us. We saw it in Japan, and Italy had its first two cases on 31 January. We recorded our first case here on 27 February, and, at that time, the pandemic stockpiles of PPE were held across the water. From the six weeks from 27 February to 6 April, we did not receive a single piece of PPE. During that six weeks, I am sure, every member of the House, like me, took numerous and multiple calls from terrified care workers and domiciliary care workers and nurses who were afraid, literally, for their lives, for their families’ lives and health and for their patients’ lives. We all know what that was like at that time. That was a result of public health preparedness being stripped out of the system because of austerity. Stockpiles in England were allowed to become depleted. Times were allowed to expire on many of the important items, and, when they were needed, they simply were not there. On top of that, the testing infrastructure that was once here and was once across many European nations was totally stripped down. We had the capacity to do 40 tests a day here when the pandemic hit. We had totally dismantled our

contact-tracing systems. Our public health doctor systems throughout the North had been reduced and diminished. That has all had an impact, and it is vital that we recognise that. When we hear today that we should remove the blinkers, I agree with that statement but probably for a different reason. We need to remove the blinkers of austerity to provide proper public health and social care for all our people. We need to support and value our front-line staff across the board and across all grades, including domiciliary care.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I respect his ability to do so. If it were not for austerity, would money actually have been spent on PPE? Would money have been spent on ventilators? That would have been a political policy direction, a decision that would have to be made. The Member opposite, like his party, talks all the time about Tory austerity, but never do they mention the terrorist campaign that raged here for 30-odd years. How many ventilators could have been purchased with the money that was spent on rebuilding our cities and towns?

Mr Gildernew: The Member will recognise that that had absolutely no impact on the fact that we were 2,800 nurses short in our system when the pandemic hit, along with all of the other items that I mentioned.

We need to start properly supporting and valuing those whom we now recognise as our real essential workers: domiciliary care workers, porters, receptionists, social workers, nurses and doctors throughout the entire system. We need to tackle health inequalities and poor mental health. We absolutely must transform the health service and reform adult social care, and we need to provide proper support for our invaluable, indispensable and absolutely hard-pressed and overworked informal carers, who have once again picked up much of the burden of the emergency. In short, we need to work together to provide proper public services and resources to care for all of our people, to prosper as an economy and to prepare for future public health crises in a way that reflects our needs on this island. I support the Bill.

Ms McLaughlin: As I have mentioned in previous Budget debates, it has been absolutely impossible to adequately scrutinise the Budget, as we are trying to do in the evolving crisis. I concur with the Minister's assessment that the current Budget process has not been ideal. I also agree with previous speakers that we need to get to a place where we can align long-term Budgets with a well thought-out and coherent Programme for Government that is people-based and place-based and that drives prosperity and social well-being and where we look at subregional targets.

It is hard to make a new speech when we have done so many on these Budgets. We continually repeat ourselves, but I suppose that politicians are used to doing that quite regularly. This morning, one important story was largely overlooked amidst the anger over Dominic Cummings's refusal to resign, but it was a story that was much more important for businesses and workers in Northern Ireland. The British Government are nowhere near ready in the training of the 50,000 new customs agents needed to deal with Brexit. I remind the Chamber that we are little more than half a year away from the biting point of Brexit: just over 240 days. The Prime Minister may have boasted about getting Brexit done, but the real impact will hit Northern Ireland at the end of December when the transition period comes to an end. The Prime Minister

could decide to extend that transition period. That is what he should do, but, just as he will not sack Dominic Cummings, he says that he absolutely will not extend the Brexit transition period, despite that being the obvious and sensible thing to do. We in the North, the region most effected by Brexit, remain unclear about what customs arrangements will be in place. It seems that there will not be enough trained custom agents to help us to know about them, whatever they are.

While COVID-19 is, in the immediate term, a complete disaster for the economy, we should not overlook the reality of Brexit over the longer term. It is likely to be a complete disaster for our economy. What makes it worse is that, with just a few months to go, we in the region most affected know so little about what comes next. It is absolutely disgraceful. It is almost as if Downing Street cares little about Northern Ireland, despite what the Prime Minister has said on private visits here.

We have one certainty, which is that the UK will have to focus more on growing our own talent and skills, while relying less on migrants coming here to work. We will have to invest more in skills and training, and that must be one of our investment priorities. That brings me to subject closest to my heart and close to the interests of the people in my Foyle constituency: the Magee medical school. Yesterday, I met — virtually, of course — senior representatives of Ulster University. I left the meeting with the sense that they were as in the dark about what happens now regarding progressing the business case for the medical school as we in Northern Ireland are about the new customs arrangements after Brexit. We need to know what is going on. We need more detail, and we need greater transparency. That applies to the British Government's plan for Brexit, but it also applies to the plans of our Government, the Executive Office and senior officials when it comes to the Magee medical school.

6.00 pm

The medical school is due to open its doors in September 2021. Like every other elected representative and everybody in the city, I was delighted by the announcement, but a lot of work needs to be done for that to take place. It needs to be done very quickly, with a sense of urgency, and I urge the joint First Ministers to proceed at pace.

I support the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Ms Mullan: As a new Member, I have found the debate to be very interesting and beneficial. When we debated the Budget Bill earlier in the year, we could not have foreseen the devastating impact of COVID. We were very concerned with addressing 10 years of austerity and ensuring that we had the funds available to deliver the commitments that were made in New Decade, New Approach.

Today's Vote on Account will allow Departments to spend money to deliver our public services and begin the process of rebuilding our economy. Public services include the education system. In order to plan for the reopening of schools, the Department of Education will not only need resources but must look within its own budget to areas of work that have not happened in this period and re-profile that money to provide support to our children and young people who are returning to school and to support their mental health and well-being.

The childcare sector is almost decimated. We need to ensure that that sector is supported to reopen, provide sustainability and support parents back to work.

The Programme for Government and New Decade, New Approach commit the Executive and the Assembly to deliver services and resources based on objective need and to tackle regional disparities. Unfortunately, you have two Derry representatives speaking one after another. Not only are we obviously very passionate about where we come from but we are passionate about delivering the projects that have been worked on for many years. The recent announcement of match funding for the Derry City and Strabane strategic growth plan and inclusive future fund, alongside the Executive commitment to open the medical school at Magee, are examples of what can and should be done.

Following the financial crash of 2008-09, austerity became the default position of the rich and powerful across the world. Working-class people bore the burden while bankers and speculators walked away. When we emerge from the COVID-19 health and financial crisis, we cannot return to the default position of austerity and heap the cost on the poor and low paid. Poverty is not a fact of life and there should not be an acceptable level of poverty. We have it in our gift to put the eradication of poverty at the heart of everything that we do here.

As I stated earlier, in the past 10 weeks, we have had to learn to adapt and work together. In supporting the Budget (No. 2) Bill, let us carry that forward and look to do things differently, ensuring that we protect workers and families.

Mr Blair: I add my thanks to those expressed previously to the Minister and his officials for the work that has been done in recent weeks in response to a major crisis. I hope that, as well as other messages, when the Minister leaves today, he will take the message to his officials that all of us, I am sure, even when we do not immediately get the answers that we want, even when we make further demands on behalf of those who are in need, are massively indebted to those officials for how they have swung into action to deal with the crisis.

As the Alliance Party spokesperson for agriculture and the environment, I want to address two important and urgent issues. I do that mindful of the financial commitment that has been required already in relation to COVID and, of course, the necessary post-COVID planning as well.

The first of the two urgent issues is that we know, as clarified in a recent UK Government report, that the forthcoming Northern Ireland protocol, which is an integral part of the withdrawal agreement, will require, without doubt, expanded infrastructure at ports in Northern Ireland. This requirement, of course, relates to checks on animal and food products coming here from GB. Quite separate from our thoughts or opinions on the journey that got us to this point or, indeed, the current circumstances, preparations for the protocol and its pending implementation are essential. Surely, it is reasonable to expect that provision is being made and that checks are in place in the Department of Finance to ensure that there is capacity for the considerable upscaling of the current arrangements in ports, which apply only to live animals. Hopefully, the Minister, in his response, can provide some detail of the planned provision, especially the additional staffing costs that it is expected will be involved and the

arrangements to ensure that the necessary staff resources are in place.

I turn to the environment. Earlier this year, Executive commitments understandably raised expectations of imminent action to tackle climate change. New Decade, New Approach brought us this promise:

“The Executive will tackle climate change head on with a strategy to address the immediate and longer term impacts of climate change.”

This pledge, listed in the published agreement under “Priorities of the Restored Executive”, was accompanied by a pledge also to bring forward a climate change Act. Recent, much-reported environmental improvements — less traffic and reduced pollution — albeit in a time of unique and challenging circumstances, have demonstrated clearly that change can happen. However, thus far, that change has been circumstantial rather than policy driven. To harness the short-term, recent gains in air quality, it would be reassuring to see a firm, coordinated departmental commitment, backed by budgetary provision, to ensuring that the pledges previously given are fulfilled.

We know that this will require collaborative efforts across Departments, not least DAERA, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for the Economy, although a commitment to financial provision is also required, and I hope that the Minister will refer to that later. Going forward, there will be opportunities to work with others as well, including through the recently established all-party group on climate change, chaired by my colleague Rachel Woods. However, those involved in that work will want to see commitment with policy and budgetary detail. Perhaps the Minister, when he responds, can offer this insight and assist, hopefully, in the coordination of this commitment across Departments. Perhaps he will also indicate that the necessary funding has been requested from others and tell us whether it is being provided and whether it can meet the declared commitments.

It could be argued that the first matter that I highlighted is political; the second, natural. However, both involve imminent changes that will affect all of us. I hope that the Minister will clarify today that the necessary measures and finances are in place. Perhaps they are hidden in the detail that was mentioned a number of times earlier. We know that they are needed to deal with these serious issues, and soon.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I take this opportunity to commend the Minister for bringing the Budget before us today, particularly in the context of a very serious global pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, I welcome the funding that he recently provided to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to help to offset the impact of the pandemic on the agriculture and horticulture sectors. The £25 million was particularly warmly welcomed by the sector.

On Friday, the AERA Minister was before the Committee. From listening to him and reading some of the public statements since the funding was announced, it appears that the priority sectors are dairy, beef and horticulture. However, I have been approached, like many other MLAs, by beef and sheep farmers who have been gravely affected

by the pandemic. Some 80% of all farms in the North are beef and sheep farms. Of the 25,000 farms in the North, 20,000 are beef and sheep farms. They have experienced a very severe price drop as a result of the pandemic and, indeed, the increase in input costs. We received various reports indicating, for example, that cattle have increased by in the region of £230 a head; lambs by in the region of over £30 a head. Many of these farms are also in areas of natural constraint (ANC), and the farmers also have to contend with the loss of the ANC payment this year. Many of the farms are quite small, and they struggle to benefit from the other schemes, such as the self-employed income support scheme. As I said earlier in my speech, it is important that many of these farms, which fall through the cracks of the other schemes, can be supported by this funding. It is a long road to recovery. We got a report from the Livestock and Meat Commission just last week that said that it is a long road to business as usual.

This Budget has also been made in the context of Brexit, which overshadows a lot of it. Unlike the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit was not what you could call a natural disaster. It was deliberate action by English right-wing Tories who have very little regard to here. I say that in the context that the majority of people here in the North did not vote to leave the European Union. One of the consequences, from an agriculture and rural affairs perspective, is that we have been removed from the common agricultural policy. That has thrown into jeopardy future funding for farm support beyond the lifetime of the current Westminster Parliament. We have been told that the funding is secure until then, but after that we just do not know. It also applies to the pillar 2 rural development programme. We all know from our communities the importance of the rural development programme, particularly priority 6, for funding our rural community groups and for building community hubs, infrastructure and village renewal. That is also going when we leave the EU. I commend the Minister, who has been lobbying the British Government in relation to the UK shared prosperity fund. It was the British Government that removed us from the EU, with the consequent loss of that funding, so it should be the British Government who should replace that lost funding through their UK shared prosperity fund. I welcome the fact that the Minister has been lobbying the British Government in respect of that.

Turning back to something that is really critical and connected to Brexit and the future well-being of the industry here: the failure of the British Government, two weeks ago, to support an amendment to the Agriculture Bill that was proposed by Neil Parish, who is the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee at Westminster. His amendment would have prevented low-standard food imports from countries that have lower welfare and environmental standards coming into Britain. This will further undermine the industry and decimate the British market. The British market is really important for farmers here, because 75% of our beef is exported into the British market. Britain itself is only 58% self-sustaining. If we have a situation where Britain enters into trade deals with countries around the world that have lower environmental and animal welfare standards, cheaper food will flood the market over there. It will destroy the market for our farmers, and it will completely decimate farming in Britain. Perhaps that is the strategy anyway. We recall that, a number of months ago, there was a leaked memo from

a senior Tory that indicated that they wanted to run down food production completely and turn Britain into Singapore, where they import all their food.

So that was a very serious blow two weeks ago, and the farming unions here and, indeed, across the water in Britain were devastated. They felt that it was a slap in the teeth for our hard-pressed industry, which has worked so well to build up the industry here. It has been compounded by the failure of the British Government to make any progress on the EU protocol. This is a technical note, prepared by the European Commission, that we got just last week through the Committee. It says that, if the existing posts are maintained as we enter the transition period, there will be no entry point solution in Northern Ireland for live animals and products of animal origin. That is a very, very serious situation as we are moving into this transition period. If we do not have some arrangement for this, there will be no points of entry for our markets here. That could be devastating for the industry here.

The point that I am making is that the British Government have let down and sold out their farmers.

People are quite right to extol the benefits of the Union — that is their belief — but that is what the British Government have done to farming across the water and potentially here. They have run down farmers in their function as food producers. As the COVID-19 pandemic highlights, a secure local food supply line is crucial, particularly in times of crisis, and it is shocking that that amendment to the Bill was not accepted a couple of weeks ago.

6.15 pm

In conclusion, I support the Budget. We recognise that the Executive have a restricted funding envelope at their disposal, and I support the Minister in his efforts both in the Executive and on behalf of the Executive to press the British Government and the EU for the necessary additional funding to support our agri-food businesses. I therefore thank you and commend the Budget.

Mr McGrath: In contributing to today's debate on the incoming Budget, I am fully cognisant of the context in which we find ourselves as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on every part of our way of life. It has resulted in businesses having to make huge sacrifices by closing temporarily and by throwing themselves on the mercy of various Departments because they are in need of support. The public have had to make their sacrifices through social distancing and isolating themselves. We are hearing that there is another recession hurtling towards us. That is to say nothing of the democratic deficit that the pandemic has created in this House, where our role as elected legislators has been radically altered and, indeed, restricted. Thankfully, however, we are beginning to see a return to some sense of normality, be that just the new norm.

The context of the North is and has been for many years a divided one. We therefore need to see now more than ever a renewed sense of reconciliation. The Budget will play an essential part in addressing how we begin to put the North back together following years of stagnation, stalemate and disruption.

The architects and peacemakers of 1998 certainly understood that and that our response to the critical matters of the day in times of exceptional circumstances

cannot be addressed by limiting response to their own constituency. We must always have the bigger picture in mind. That reconciliation was sadly hindered by newspaper articles that appeared in the South this weekend past, and in GB, where it would appear that there is at least one Government aide who is ready to take the legislation surrounding COVID-19 into his own hands.

The people of the North need to have faith in their Government and to know that their Government have their best interests at heart. The people of the North need to have a sense of purpose, a job and some hope, in order to have their dignity afforded to them. Our response, our investment and our Budget cannot be for the benefit of one group of people but must be for all people: for all our healthcare workers, all our teachers, all those who are unable to work, all our emergency services and more. If the Budget is not for the benefit of all, we will have failed.

I will reflect on some of the spending that will impact on the areas that I have been following through some of my Committee work. The victims payment is an issue that is causing concern at present. It is mentioned in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document and, to date, has not been progressed, which is causing worry and concern for people on the ground. Those victims have suffered enough. We need to do the right thing and deliver the pension payment to them. They have already lost enough and made enough of a sacrifice in their lives. The legislation has been approved, but we need to see the delivery. I do not believe that it is a payment that the Executive should have to make on their own, but it is one that needs to be made. The British Parliament made the Bill, and the British Exchequer should foot the bill. The scheme includes people from beyond these shores, so it should not be left to the North to pay out of its block grant.

I welcome, too, the fact that this year's Budget includes payments for those impacted on by historical institutional abuse. It is a travesty of our past, and one that is being addressed in a small way through payments from the scheme. I would welcome continued work to secure money from the institutions responsible for the abuse, as that would help the Department's balance sheets.

We are all too aware of the Budget cuts that have left our public services and staff in difficult financial hardship, and I believe that those who have been affected by those cuts could benefit from much-needed investment and financial relief. That is to say nothing of the fact that these institutions were felled for three and a half years, which left portfolios abandoned, vital projects shelved and, most shamefully, public trust in elected officials decimated. Now is the time to prove that these institutions can work and that they will deliver for the public.

I am also a member of the Health Committee and want to make a few brief remarks about the funding for our health and social care system. The health service has received an uplift in this Budget, which is not only welcome but entirely necessary. Our health service has suffered greatly from a decade of austerity, which we know was a political choice. Less than six months ago, our nurses and key workers had to stand in the rain for pay parity. If one small, positive thing comes out of this pandemic, let it be the long-awaited recognition of the importance of those workers. Never again should they have to strike for fair pay and conditions.

I also want to make a point about mental health. Last week, the Minister launched the mental health action plan, and that is very welcome, but the strategy that has yet to be launched must be properly resourced. The Minister of Health, supported by Executive colleagues, must consider a pandemic payment in our mental health and bereavement services to deal with the looming crisis that will come as a result of coronavirus.

We have been hit by a worldwide pandemic, and I appreciate and understand the massive impact that it will have on the Budget process and the moneys that the Executive and Departments will have to spend. We need to see a joined-up, strategic Budget that is flexible enough to respond to emerging need but that also addresses priorities equally. A criticism of Budgets past was that allocations were disproportionate and favoured larger parties' Departments, and I think that that would be a crass move now; one that we, certainly, are not prepared to accept and will highlight and act on should we see it happening. We need to match our spending to a set of coherent policies. It is incredibly important that our Budget should be linked to a long-term vision for our public services and our economy beyond this crisis. I do not think that there is much evidence yet of such a coherent policy, and I am interested in the Minister's thoughts on developing such.

We also need to be prepared for the impact of Brexit. Departmental officials once cited that as being the matter of their sole attention and said that preparation being undertaken by them was consuming them in everything that they did. Obviously, that has stopped because of coronavirus. It has had to take a back seat and to become the number-two priority in Departments. It is folly to accept that, by not preparing for something properly, you are ready for it. By definition, it is almost impossible. We suggest that an extension should be sought. That does not require a compromise of politics; it requires the promise of using common sense. I ask the Minister for his Department's understanding and assessment of where, he feels, the preparations for the Departments are and whether an extension would be worthwhile.

Now is the time to begin our journey for a joined-up and strategic Budget. We have to do it now. This will be a year in which we have shown our capacity for compassion in how we have responded to the ongoing COVID crisis. I welcome the news today that there have been no recorded COVID-19 deaths in last 24 hours. Thank God for that. This can also be a year in which we distribute our resources, in a strategic manner, to the places that need them most. Now is the time for a Budget that works for people, for communities, for business and for the North as a whole.

Mr Boylan: First, I will state some of the pressures that the Department for Infrastructure has been facing for a number of years, as it is important to demonstrate the structural failings of austerity. Every Member, in their constituency, most likely gets countless issues regarding our roads, the service for which has been operating on a skeleton basis in recent history as a result of departmental cuts to budgets. That includes not just fixing potholes but street light repairs and gritting. That service, before budget cuts, used to get around £35 million a year but now receives half of that.

I commend the scheme that was introduced by my colleague, Chris Hazzard, during his tenure as Infrastructure Minister, to target the repair of rural roads by way of the roads recovery fund (RRF). The legacy of that initiative is that in the last two years, the Department has allocated some £25 million to the RRF that mostly goes towards our rural roads. It is important that that scheme continues and will, hopefully, inspire the Department to further invest in similar schemes.

Meanwhile, our coveted rural community transport partnerships have faced stark cuts in their budgets in recent years. Last year's Budget allocation represented a reduction of almost 20% in the overall baseline since 2015-16. Community transport groups, which are currently facing some pressure as a result of COVID-19, are concerned that they have received a letter of offer for three months only. On top of that, they have lost a significant amount of revenue from group hire work throughout the pandemic. It is most important that the Infrastructure Minister fully engages with community transport moving forward, as it provides an invaluable service to communities and continues to do so during COVID-19 by helping with essential journeys and deliveries.

The lack of proper funding through the years because of austerity has left Departments in a vulnerable position to respond to events such as COVID-19. These are not normal circumstances for a Budget, and the reality is that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be held within the confines of conventional departmental budgets. We need to have a comprehensive perspective when looking at our response to the pandemic. All Departments are facing significant pressures right now, but it is important to realise that instead of allocating it on a departmental basis, the funding to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic has been agreed by the Executive as a whole on a needs basis.

The pressures that we currently face as a result of COVID and austerity have been compounded by the failure of the British Government to honour their commitments in New Decade, New Approach. It is noteworthy that one of those commitments was to turbocharge infrastructure and mentioned vital projects such as improving the Belfast to Dublin railway, the A5 and A6 and the Narrow Water bridge. That commitment also included assisting in investing in essential sewerage infrastructure, which is a crucial issue across the North as around 100 areas have some capacity issues with regard to sewerage infrastructure. "No drains, no cranes", is the saying in NI Water and that needs to be addressed fairly across the North to allow balanced regional growth and to tackle inequalities.

Brexit continues to overshadow everything that we do and presents other economic problems down the line. For sectors such as haulage and logistics, which are currently facing massive pressures because of COVID, this is a very worrying time indeed and it is only worsened by the British Government not heeding the calls from so many for an extension to the current Brexit deadline.

While all the issues that I have mentioned, such as austerity, COVID-19 and Brexit, are ongoing, it is important to remember that addressing the climate change emergency also has to remain a priority. Any economic strategy to recover from the crisis caused by COVID-19 must be based on a just transition towards a net zero

carbon economy, which includes tackling congestion and pollution levels and committing to decarbonising the transport network and travel behaviour.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. I was reflecting on what he said earlier, which was that allocations were going to be made on a needs rather than a departmental basis. He will, however, acknowledge that in order for money to be spent, it has to go to a Department at some point and that, in order to address some of the needs that he talked about, including the crisis in Northern Ireland Water and moving towards active and green travel, money will have to be allocated at some point to the Department for Infrastructure.

6.30 pm

Mr Boylan: Yes, absolutely. The Minister said that, as long as proposals are brought to the Executive, the Executive will make a decision on them.

The challenge ahead will, no doubt, be significant, and we need to identify how best to facilitate an economic recovery. Capital projects will have a part to play in that goal. That adds a new dimension to the importance of some of the capital projects that need to be progressed as soon as possible, such as Casement Park and the A5. The Department for Infrastructure is currently assessing its delivery capacity on capital projects this year as a result of COVID-19, and it is vital that the outcome is revealed to members of the Committee as soon as possible. Some of the projects that, I am sure, other Members and their constituents are keen to see progressed, as I am, include the Narrow Water bridge project, the Belfast to Dublin railway improvements and the A5 and A6 projects, which I mentioned. The A1 junction safety improvements is another project of importance. That project means so much to so many people, especially those who have lost a loved one on that treacherous road. It is absolutely essential that the scheme is delivered as soon as possible. The £700 million funding announced by the Finance Minister in relation to city deals is a huge plus for the North during this difficult period and should assist in progressing vital infrastructure schemes such as the Newry relief road and the second phase of the Glider, to name but a few.

In consideration of the vast challenges ahead, I commend the actions taken by the Finance Minister during this difficult period. They include the £50 million of additional funding for Translink in recent months, as well as £60 million remaining in the centre for transport issues. On top of that, the Department has received the biggest capital allocation in its history. The importance of public services and the need to protect them has been one of the overarching themes of COVID-19, a crisis that has highlighted the abhorrent nature of a policy like Tory austerity, which disregards the importance of core public services. It is crucial that we learn the lesson and that it is not forgotten in the future.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for his time today and welcome the opportunity to offer some thoughts on today's proceedings. As other Members have said, we need to reflect on the difficult context in which the Minister brings the Vote on Account to the Assembly. Not only are we in the grip of the biggest health emergency in living memory but the economic damage as a result of COVID-19 will, no doubt, weigh heavily on us all for a long time to come. All that would be bad enough in itself, if it were not set

against the grim and ghoulish backdrop of years of British Government and Tory austerity. Some people in the Chamber do not want to talk about austerity. They do not want to hear us mention that word, because it makes them feel uncomfortable. We make no apologies for it, because Sinn Féin has been saying for years that austerity was bad for your health. Let me tell you: we take no pleasure in the fact that we have been proven right.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: I will not give way.

The preparedness of the British Government to deal with a global pandemic such as the one we are now living through was compromised as a direct result of their deliberate policy of austerity. They stripped money out of the NHS, refused to pay nurses and other healthcare workers a decent living wage and decided that PPE and other vital equipment was not high on their list of priorities and that these were aspects of the health service where they could save a few quid. Those were all deliberate policy decisions made by the Tory Westminster Government of the day.

It is my firm belief that, in the North, we have been lucky that we have the right Ministers heading up the right Departments at the right time. The fact that we have Ministers like Conor Murphy in Finance and Deirdre Hargey in Communities who are actively and fundamentally opposed to austerity meant that the Executive were able to move money and resources out the door and provide targeted interventions to ensure that our citizens were supported. The citizen-centred and humanitarian approach of the Finance Minister ensured that Departments had the necessary resources available to them to meet the mounting challenges posed by the COVID crisis. Notwithstanding the hundreds of millions of pounds provided to the Department of Health, this Minister has provided money for interventions such as the enhancement of the discretionary support fund; £20 million to offset the impact of COVID on councils; £410 million in business grants; £25 million for agriculture, as my colleague Declan McAleer said; and funding packages to support the charity sector and the community support scheme. The list goes on. For that, he must be commended.

As the Finance Minister has explained, before we were faced with the challenges of COVID, our block grant was already at pre-austerity levels: £360 million in real terms, as has been said by Members who have spoken. My fear and the fear of everyone I represent is that this inept and cruel Tory Government, in true Conservative style, will use the crisis not as a lesson in the importance of investing in public services but as an excuse to inflict more austerity and hardship on us and the communities we represent. Instead of a lurch towards more austerity, we need to see government — centrally and locally — spending money on capital and regeneration projects that will revitalise our communities and act as drivers for our economy and our hospitality and tourism sectors.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document, which was concocted by the British and Irish Governments and signed up to in good faith by all parties in the Chamber, raised the expectations of the public that investment in key projects and services would be forthcoming from the British Government, but, in true perfidious Albion style, the British Government have thus far reneged on those commitments. We cannot allow the treachery of the

British Government to infect the mindset of Departments and Ministers. Now is the time for Ministers to show leadership on issues such as Casement Park. Only last month, the Committee for Communities learned that £4.5 million in ring-fenced capital funding for the Casement Park sports stadium project had been surrendered in the June 2019 and January 2020 monitoring rounds because of the continued unwillingness to make a decision on the planning application. For 11 years, Gaels in Antrim and Ulster have been waiting for a permanent, fit-for-purpose home to be built. The fact that a quarter of a million members of the GAA in Ulster are without adequate stadium facilities is nothing short of a disgrace. I wholeheartedly agree with a recent assessment by Belfast solicitor Niall Murphy that the failure to deliver on Casement Park is an equality issue.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: No, I will not, thank you. All of the potential for action since the Assembly has been restored and the fact that we now have a Minister in place are being squandered by the inaction of Minister Mallon. She is sleeping on the issue. I call on her to show leadership. If there are still matters and problems with regard to Casement Park and if she is still waiting for information, she needs to step in. She needs to pull rank and show leadership on the issue.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: No, I will not, thank you. I am going to get this statement out by hook or by crook.

From the outset of the global pandemic, protecting lives and livelihoods has, rightly, been the priority of the Finance Minister and his colleagues. Once the crisis has passed — it will, eventually — we must ensure that such projects as Casement, the subregional stadium project and, of course, Narrow Water bridge and other revitalisation projects are advanced so that they can act as the economic drivers that we will, undoubtedly, require in the post-COVID world. This crisis is unparalleled, and there is an onus on all of us, especially the Ministers, to bring forward any and all measures that will support people and bolster public services at this time. I support the Bill.

Ms Armstrong: I will not spend this time criticising Ministers; in fact, I will thank a Minister. The House has already agreed the Supply resolution for the further Vote on Account. That allows existing services to continue until this legislation is passed, enabling funds to meet the balance of estimated expenditure for this financial year.

As we have heard today, this year's Budget is a moving feast. Due to the coronavirus, the Finance Minister and the Executive have been allocated unprecedented funds to help citizens through the crisis. As the amounts change regularly, it is a difficult process to manage and report on, so I thank the Minister for getting us to this stage. Yes, we would like to have seen more detail, and, yes, we would like to have seen it much earlier, but we have lost so many citizens throughout the crisis that it was right and proper to concentrate on them.

As we know, the figures provided in the further Vote on Account 2020-21 is the expenditure up until October 2020. Clarification is still required on what will happen after October. Others have said it today, and I will say it again: the Budget is not set against an agreed Programme for Government. We await that document from the Executive.

Most Committees still await ministerial priorities. The virus has interrupted so much, but we should not allow it to distract us completely from the objectives that we all want to see progressed. 'New Decade, New Approach' had agreed priorities, many of which have not been brought forward yet. I am concerned that, unless those priorities are detailed in a Budget, they will not progress in this term of office. For example, the review of education may not progress. That is not negotiable. There are reasons why some parties joined the Executive, and some of those reasons are in 'New Decade, New Approach'. It is therefore vital that the Budget includes the investment required to deliver on those priorities. I ask the Minister to tell us, in his summation, what his thoughts are about that.

I appreciate that the Budget cannot provide detailed information at this time. I know that we have an ever-changing picture, as Barnett consequentials flow into Departments here. I am also mindful that Westminster can decide to reduce spend in areas and that that can have a negative consequence here. What do we know of their plans? Will we be completely dependent on the whims of Westminster this year?

I recognise that Departments have huge costs at this time, but they also have many projects that are not being taken forward because of the coronavirus. I expect that those savings will be identified and drawn back into the centre for reallocation in the monitoring round. We will hear about that in September and October. Due to necessity, Committees have not been able to scrutinise details in the way that we should and that was called for in the renewable heat incentive (RHI) report. Sadly, we are again considering a one-year Budget. I get it: we are in a crisis, but we need to plan our way out of the crisis. That is what government is; that is what leadership is about. During 'New Decade', we all agreed that we needed longer funding periods. We talked about three-year Budgets. The virus has taken that ability away from us.

Sadly, we expect some businesses to close and some people to be made redundant. We hope that the situation does not cripple us with huge hikes in future rates bills, with the cost of construction going through the roof and the costs of food and fuel going up again. Mr Frew mentioned that, when he talked about savings plans. I concur with him. I agree that the Executive should not just spend money at this stage but should be looking to see where the savings are and where we can spend the money properly. I remind the Minister and the Executive that the Committees' role is not just to scrutinise but to assist and support Ministers. Committees can ask the questions, "So what? Is that project necessary? Is that really a priority? Do we have to spend the money now, or can we programme it to be spent in the next year?"

We need to generate the necessary savings that make this Budget, for the rest of this year, as effective and efficient as possible. There are key areas where we need investment. Others have talked about them, but I will highlight them again. I ask the Minister to outline how he intends to take this investment forward after October, for the rest of the financial year. With regard to Northern Ireland Water, if we do not invest in our waste-water system, development will be hindered across Northern Ireland. As has been said before in the Chamber, "Without drains, there are no cranes". That must be a priority. If we do not sort out the pipes under the ground, we will have no

new homes and we cannot invest in construction. We will not deliver on those city deals programmes. Perhaps now is the time to look at innovative ways to fund necessary services. Alliance has spoken many times and has faced a lot of criticism, but I will say it again: Northern Ireland Water needs to be able to treat income differently to allow it to borrow to invest in our waste-water treatment system. If it is not invested in, there will be no cranes and we will see further economic crisis.

The position with Translink is stark. If we do not invest in our public transport system, we will not have one. I am glad that much of the money for Translink has been front-loaded this year, but what happens after October? Will we still have a company that is asked to wear down its reserves to the point of bankruptcy?

So far, the support for those who are self-employed and have taken the risk to set up their own businesses or work as sole traders has been found wanting. We may as well kiss programmes such as Go For It goodbye. We will have a difficult time encouraging anyone to risk setting up their own business or to become self-employed.

In coming months, we will have a lot to do to encourage confidence in the Government when those business owners feel so let down and left out.

6.45 pm

Housebuilding legislation is going forward to address the necessary reclassification of social housing. The amount of potential capital investment that was unspent in previous years is shameful when we consider how many people are in housing stress. We must invest in housing in order to meet that and facilitate the type of housing that society needs. With the Budget that is being brought forward, we need to stop doing what we have always done and start to deliver real opportunity, utilising money as efficiently as possible. One good thing that has actually come out of the coronavirus crisis is that we have managed to meet homelessness head-on. There needs to be the same commitment for the rest of the year in order to prevent the number of homeless people rising again. When lockdown relaxes and we progress through the Executive's phased plan, we must ensure that planning applications are progressed much more quickly by councils, still within the rules, in order for contracts to be agreed and signed and to ensure the commencement of new-build projects.

With regard to benefits, mitigation measures will continue. We all agreed that that was a good thing. However, we should push DWP to bring forward managed migration into universal credit. We need to know whether that will be brought forward in this financial year, as it means that more costs would be met and would allow us to deliver on the poverty strategy's aims when that strategy is brought forward. That is where we come to planning. We need the Executive to set out the strategies that will underpin how the Budget is spent. We need to be more creative and less dependent on red tape and bureaucracy. There are businesses and organisations that can reach people much more quickly and effectively. That is why contracts and tendering systems need to be updated to allow social enterprises and local companies to deliver services that will not only deliver a service but will invest back into local communities and society.

In future Budgets, we need to learn from what we now know as a result of coronavirus. Investment is needed in community care services to ensure that those who care for our most precious relations — older people, children, people with disabilities and those who are sick — are not treated as cheap labour. There needs to be investment in charities that support the community. We have all seen and worked with those charities that, over the past nine weeks, have quite frankly helped to keep the community alive. They were the people who helped to deliver food parcels; who were the only voice who called that isolated person who was shielding; who looked after care workers' children; and who volunteered and worked in care facilities, putting themselves at risk.

Care homes care for many people who have nowhere else to live, yet the staff there receive the lowest wages. Healthcare staff went on strike to get fairer pay. We need to learn from coronavirus and do things better and smarter for everyone who lives here. Perhaps, it is time to reconsider society. Maybe we should consider providing a universal basic income, and then we could address poverty. If we put people first in the Budget planning process, we can come out of this awful crisis with some hope for the future.

I ask the Minister to confirm whether he can and will ask Ministers to ensure that, when providing future financial asks, they do so not just to provide services but to provide services that deliver positive change and progress for the whole community.

Miss Woods: We have already discussed the issues around the process that the Executive have pursued with the Budget and the Vote on Account earlier today. Another important issue needs to be raised regarding the procedure of the Bill, which has just been published and made available by email to Members, and is now being debated at Second Stage. The reasons for such a rushed process have been put forward by the Minister. However, the issue of why the Assembly is expected to vote on the principle of legislation on the same day that it has been laid before the House remains apparent to me.

To ensure that legislation that is put forward by the Executive is adequately scrutinised, we should not accept such a procedure lightly. It must not be the case that Ministers feel that they have the power to rush things through in that manner. Is it the case that we are in that position because of the limited number of Assembly sitting days now, or is the preferred option of the Executive to avoid difficult questions when Members have had a proper chance to look at what is in front of them? It would be helpful to hear from the Minister about what precedent is set for the work of Assembly by voting on legislation just after it has been published. It should not happen again.

I have raised some of the issues around the fact that we will not have the Main Estimates and a comprehensive evaluation of departmental spending until the autumn. That was also raised in the main Budget debate earlier this month, so I will not labour the point any further than is necessary.

The Health Minister stated in the Executive briefing on COVID this afternoon that a second wave of this virus is widely expected in the months ahead. Do we have either enough in reserves or contingency plans built in to deal with that? I would like to ask the Minister what plans he

has. If we are in a second wave of this virus, with similar PPE requirements and similar lockdown requirements and with the business closures that we have now, are those being developed?

I will turn to some of the gaps in the COVID-19 spending and to a green economic recovery, which I mentioned in my earlier speech. Some Members might have heard this before, but I do not apologise. As an opposition MLA, I feel that it must be continually raised. Those matters are relevant to the Bill, which sets in law the release of funds to the Departments based on the COVID-19 allocations published on 19 May.

With regard to our councils, £20.4 million allocated by the Minister for Communities is welcome in order to initially cover losses and the pressures experienced by local authorities because of COVID, but there must be more. This is a drop in the ocean of what is needed. Our councils cannot become insolvent, but some are dangerously close to that. Questions will need to be answered about not only the future of local government institutions, but what this will mean for schemes and plans that had been agreed and on which work had begun. What will it mean for large capital projects? Will councils have to re-profile finances that were allocated to something completely different? Will large schemes be put on the long finger? How will that affect the provision of public services? Communities must not see cuts or closures as we come out of this pandemic. Local authorities across GB have received funding commitments, and councils here need to be in the same position.

The Minister stated that the Executive intend to absorb the cost of councils' lost income, but how? We do not have any details of that, and figures published in the COVID-19 allocations document do not add up, so how, Minister, do the Executive intend to manage this?

The economic impact of this pandemic is being felt without us having entered into recession yet. This, on top of the uncertainty of Brexit, will be felt for years to come. There are many businesses still falling through the gaps, and the impact on them will be much greater. The furlough scheme, which I mentioned earlier, has been welcome, of course, to keep as many people in employment as possible, and it has been a lifeline for some sectors. However, if employers who have not had any income since March are told to either bring their staff back to work if they can, safely, if that is even possible, or on a part-time basis and to contribute to their wage packet, there will not be many businesses left. What if we are not at that stage of the Executive plan? Will we have more people feeling that they are being forced back into the workplace before it is safe to do so? Will the Executive be able to help those employees and the employer, should that happen? If we are not at the appropriate stage of the plan, do the Executive, in recognising the importance of the hospitality sector, amongst others, envision helping businesses financially if they cannot open safely and are facing the only choice they have of making their staff unemployed?

As we know, not all businesses have received the same support. Some, like sole traders, that were not eligible for other Government grant schemes were told that a hardship fund was on the way, only to find out that it did not apply to them. Yet again, they are waiting to hear if there is anything else for them to keep their business afloat or if they should just make the minimum payments to keep

them operating after this. I ask the Minister this: is there anything left in the Budget to help those who have been left out?

Many Members have been contacted by local charities that are eager to find out where they fit into the Government support, and we welcomed the announcement on 7 May of £15.5 million to support them. Minister Hargey also announced that it would be launched very shortly after that — on 20 May. It is now 26 May, and we are now in our ninth week of lockdown, during which many traditional forms of fundraising for charities have been impossible. Are all charities and social enterprises in Northern Ireland supposed to avail themselves of funding from that one pot to maintain key services? It will not be enough. Are the same organisations that help our most vulnerable and other organisations, like those that work with animal welfare, to be the last to be given support?

During the Budget scrutiny processes, Committees were told that the Executive are facing pressures in departmental budgetary needs and in delivering New Decade, New Approach priorities. There is simply not enough funding to do all that we aspire to do. This raised questions from many about New Decade, New Approach. As others outlined, there have been some gaps in producing the estimated budgets that are aligned to NDNA priorities in some Departments as well as commitments that were made in the House. I surmise that NDNA is something of a wish list: uncosted and, therefore, subject to being reprioritised not just because of COVID, but just to be kicked down the line further.

This Assembly declared a climate emergency earlier this year, but there is certainly no emergency fund here for that. Perhaps it is time to have an open and honest conversation about it. There are less than two years left in this mandate and we cannot have everything contained in it, and it will not be delivered this year or next.

I turn now to some of the inevitable issues arising from the lockdown to deal with the COVID pandemic. These are not pressures that came to light only with the benefit of hindsight. The Executive were well warned and aware of the worrying prospect that lockdown could lead to a rise in domestic violence and abuse, an increase in mental ill health, mental health issues and, of course, the devastating economic impact of shutting down businesses and industry. That begs the question, why is there no dedicated strategy with appropriate resources and funding allocated to deal with domestic abuse at this time? What are the Executive doing to deal with serious mental health and addiction issues that many of our constituents are facing right now?

We knew that these things would all be difficult, so why were no adequate financial resources allocated to comprehensive preventative strategies to deal with them. The Executive response to these issues is still lacking, and it is certainly something for the Minister to consider when making bulk-Budget allocations.

How does the Bill and the budgetary process now pursued by the Executive prepare us for what is coming down the line? I asked the same question about the Budget allocation on 5 May. I do not believe that I got a proper answer and nor has it been answered here today. We know that an economic recession is inevitable. We know that not all businesses will survive and that this is an extremely

difficult time. Therefore, what work is happening now to deal with the future of the economy?

We were promised an economic recovery plan weeks ago, as was mentioned earlier. The Minister indicated that it will be discussed by the Executive this week, which is welcome. I ask the Minister, has he seen it and, if he has, what is his assessment of it and can it be resourced from the proposals before us today? What happens in the autumn if it turns out that the Departments no longer have adequate resources to deliver such a plan? Will we in the Back Benches get to see it or is it confined to the five-parties who sit at the Executive table?

Dr Aiken: No, we have not seen it either.

Mr Frew: We do not get to see it.

Miss Woods: Thank you. Good to know.

We need a sustainable, fair and just recovery to get out of this. We need a plan, especially as we face economic recession, and not a plan like that implemented by Governments after our last social and economic disruption caused by the crash in 2008 when we bailed out the banks, but to provide stimulus through components of the green new deal and bail out our people. It will not have quick fixes, but we need a long-term plan that does not penalise people by entering into austerity politics. If we believe the Tories, who have said that austerity is not an option, this will require huge public expenditure. Mark Carney, the former head of the Bank of England, wrote last month:

“After the covid crisis, it’s reasonable to expect people to demand improvements in the quality and coverage of social support and medical care, greater attention to be paid to managing tail risks, and more heed to be given to the advice of scientific experts.

The great test of whether this new hierarchy of values will prevail is climate change. After all, climate change is an issue that (i) involves the entire world, from which no one will be able to self-isolate; (ii) is predicted by science to be the central risk tomorrow; and (iii) we can only address if we act in advance and in solidarity.

Many have compared the covid crisis to armed conflict. After the first world war was won, the rallying cry was to make Britain “a fit country for heroes to live in”. Once this war against an invisible enemy is over, our ambitions should be bolder—nothing less than to make “a fit planet for our grandchildren to live on.”

In the words of my green colleagues in the European Parliament:

“Our re-emergence from the COVID-19 crisis will be difficult. We will grieve. For some the pain will be acute. Many will be under severe financial pressure. In many ways the current crisis has left us feeling helpless and with little control. We do still have options though.”

Instead of refurbishing a system that has shown inherent weakness, we need to revitalise the economy through legally binding targets and targeted investments. We cannot keep supporting a system that abuses our planetary and environmental boundaries. We need a just transition and a green new deal.

As I have mentioned many times before in this Chamber, a green recovery presents us with a short- and long-term vision of sustainable jobs for life, with simultaneous improvements socially, environmentally and economically. It is not about getting back to business as usual, where many struggled to get by in a world endangered by escalating pollution and waste. A green recovery aims to reduce waste, cut bills for participating households, sustain employment through recession and modernise our housing stock. I remind Members, yet again, that the Executive parties committed and agreed to this in 2011. What is still missing from the Executive is the vision of what kind of world we want to return to and how we build back better.

7.00 pm

By focusing yet again on reactionary policies we avoid implementing forward-thinking, innovative and positive solutions to all of the difficulties that face us. We have little, if any, information on the Department's expected savings or services that they will not be able to provide. The second Budget Bill, of course, is a practical solution to the short-term cash issues faced by some departments, but we still have no longer-term view of this year's budget.

The Minister wrote today for the 'Irish News'. In conclusion, he mentioned that we face the existential threat of global warming, which requires a transition to a zero-carbon economy, which I, of course, welcome. What is the Minister and the Executive's vision? Will he commit to investing in a green recovery, a just transition, using a green new deal to reboot our economy, create jobs, warm our homes, make new homes sustainable, boost revenue, strengthen public service and increase prosperity and save our planet? Dealing with climate breakdown and our biodiversity crisis is not separate from our economic issues; they are all intrinsically linked. The Executive must step up to the plate and show leadership when it comes to the climate emergency, and we need a clear long-term strategy. There is no time for further reactionary policies or sticking plasters on the serious issues ahead.

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am aware that Mr Carroll is speaking next, but I wonder if you can advise on the best way, in the absence of interventions being taken, for a Member of the House to correct statements that have been made around a Minister's portfolio, particularly in relation to Casement Park? Some statements have been made that do not completely reflect the position, particularly when certain parties have had three years to deal with the issues and have not.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. The Member will resume his seat. The Member is relatively new, but he is experienced in politics and was in Westminster for many years. He knows that that is not a point of order. He has got his comments into Hansard, even if he was chancing his arm to do it.

Mr Carroll: I spoke at length earlier on a similar and connected issue, so I will try not to repeat myself, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but it is becoming farcical with regard to the processes of scrutiny and accountability here. I share in some of the comments made by Rachel Woods. In the space of a couple of hours, we have gone from the First Stage to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. It is only while I am here listening and taking part in the debates that I have been sent the most recent Budget

documents. At a cursory glance — I emphasise that — there is little or no serious detail about the breakdown of departmental spending. We then find out that opposition parties, only a handful of whom are outside the five-party Executive, must submit amendments by tomorrow. I know that the Executive may not like scrutiny, but this really takes the biscuit.

Suffice it to say that I will vote against the Budget for the reasons that I outlined earlier. Precisely when we need a break with the failed politics of the past, this Budget, even at a glance, looks like a continuation of neoliberalism and — dare I say it — austerity politics. Major departments will be unable to meet costs, and Minister Murphy's attempts to present many figures as increases in spending are largely spin. The Health Department was already chronically underfunded entering the crisis, as people have said. Any increase in spending runs far short of departmental requirements and simply reflects rising inflation and a population that is living longer. Much worse, if you read the finer detail of the projections, is that health spending, going forward, is to be predicated on £50 million savings from health trusts — more austerity, in other words. As I said earlier, it is shocking that, during a health pandemic, the Executive are contemplating further austerity across health trusts. I think that I have raised that specific concern in the Chamber about five times and have had no direct response. The Minister may accuse me of repetition: I stand guilty as charged. I will raise it again until I get an adequate response from the Minister or somebody else.

That aside, I want to, at least partially, respond to the Minister's comments about taxation. Frankly, I think that the Minister purposefully caricatured the question in an effort at deflection. Let me repeat that, like everyone, I am, of course, aware that taxation powers, such as corporation tax, are not currently under the control of the Executive. The point I made was that, for a nearly a ten-year period, Sinn Féin and the DUP made lobbying for those powers, in order to cut taxes for big businesses, their cornerstone economic policy. Indeed —.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will give way in a second. Indeed, in a sense, that policy defined the economic strategy of previous Governments here for a decade. It is hypocritical, to say the least, for a government party to spend years talking about the need for tax cuts for big businesses and then attack a sole MLA for raising the issue of the need to tax the rich during a crisis such as this.

During the coming decade, especially in the deep recession that we now face, we need an urgent reversal of that kind of politics that includes raising taxes on the wealthy, raising corporation taxes and an emergency wealth tax to ensure that those with broad shoulders carry the burden of the COVID-19 crisis. Will the Finance Minister support such a move, at least in principle? If so, has he raised it directly with his Executive colleagues or the British Treasury during his few months in office?

I also want to respond to some of the points that have been made. Mr Buckley referred to the "Take, take, take" approach, which, if I am referring to his comments correctly, he said, was advocated by me. On corporation tax, I suggest that he has not got the memo that reducing corporation tax is no longer in vogue and, indeed, that

trickle-down economics does not work and cannot be implemented, especially in this period.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I understand his principled position on corporation tax. It differs from mine. You caricature reductions in corporation tax as tax cuts for big business. That is your line. That is your strapline. Do you not accept that the sole purpose of reducing corporation tax is to create employment and bring jobs to these shores for the very people that you talk about?

Mr Carroll: There is no evidence for the point that the Member has made. The evidence and research that has been done on cutting corporation tax shows that it would give a gift to wealthy individuals and result in at least £200 million being cut from the block grant. The Member's position seems to be fewer trains and more tax cuts. That should be opposed by everybody.

Ms Caoimhe Archibald referred to a windfall tax on corporations. I absolutely support that. Does the Minister? Karen Mullan emphasised the need for us not to return to austerity as the default position. I agree with her on that. Does the Minister? Previously the Executive united —.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: No, I will not; I am finishing my comments. Previously, the Executive united to get money to lay off thousands of Civil Service workers, a regrettable and wrong move. Will the Minister and the Executive declare their support for an emergency tax on the wealthy and corporations? If not, why not?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Every Member who indicated that they wished to speak in the debate has now spoken. I call the Minister of Finance, Conor Murphy, to conclude and make the winding-up speech on the debate.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Members, Chairs and Deputy Chairs who have contributed to the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. It has been useful to hear the views of respective Committee members and other Members on the important financial and economic issues that face us, as an Administration, in these unprecedented times. I have noted down many of the issues. Some of them relate to Members' Committee responsibilities and departmental issues. I do not purport to speak in detail on behalf of every Department, but I will respond as best as I can to some of the points.

The Chair of the Finance Committee raised various issues. He and other Members raised the issue of sole traders and the businesses that have fallen through the cracks. The intent behind the £40 million that we set aside for business hardship was to capture as many businesses as possible. My experience of looking at the other business schemes is that there is such a variety and uniqueness about some businesses that it is almost impossible to capture their characteristics under one scheme, but we tried to capture as many as we could. I realise, particularly with sole traders, that the criteria seemed to change after it was initially released and that has understandably caused angst among them. It is, of course, a policy issue for the Department for the Economy. I understand that it is almost impossible to capture every business, but I wish to see them capture as many as they can. I have heard that, as many others have repeated today, sole traders are one of the key groups that have fallen through the cracks.

The Member also asked about the rates extension and the level of support. We will get the detail on what businesses are in it, because that has to be in the form of regulation, which will come through his Committee. I think that Gordon Dunne also asked about that. That detail will come. We will provide it shortly.

In my view, there is overcommitment in relation to what we have contributed. It is necessary because we have an emergency situation and have to try to get support to vulnerable people, the health sector and businesses. Some of the schemes that we have set up and allocated money to will, perhaps, not spend what we had intended, and that will contribute significantly to our ability to manage that overcommitment. Several people asked about reprioritisation. We have commissioned a review across the Executive to see that people spend the money that they have been allocated and, if that will not be possible, to see how we can use it in the time ahead.

The Deputy Chairperson raised the issue of scrutiny, and we have, of course, accepted that the situation is not ideal. It is a fast-moving public expenditure situation, and any attempt by my Department to produce a detailed document would have been thwarted by the need for the Executive to react quickly to the emergent COVID-19 pressures. People will understand that the vast majority of civil servants, who are relied on to put these documents together, are working from home. That is not to say that they have not been provided with the IT equipment to do so, but it makes the gathering up of figures from across all Departments and the collation of all of that into a single document very difficult.

Of course, the role of the scrutiny Committees in these restrictive circumstances is all the more important, and I want to see them getting the information that they need. I intend to have a draft Budget before the House in September, and the timing of that will depend on the spending review. People mentioned that they would like to see a longer-term budgetary process. Of course, that is dependent not necessarily on our actions but on the spending review that takes place in Westminster. That was due to take place over the summer, but it has been postponed by the Treasury. I hope that it takes place as soon as possible, because it will, in turn, inform our ability to carry out a much longer-term budgetary process and one that will give us greater ability to plan our Budget and allocations, as well as cohesion between Programme for Government objectives and budgetary spend and plans.

The Member also asked for a fuller explanation of the Utility Regulator. The Vote on Account reflects only funding provided by the Executive. As the Utility Regulator receives most of its funding through receipts from industry, not directly from government, the Vote on Account figure for the Utility Regulator is relatively low. The total cash authorised for the Utility Regulator in 2019-2020 in the spring Supplementary Estimates was significantly higher due to a one-off adjustment of £1 million that is not required in 2020-21. The 90% figure is based on the 2019-2020 cash requirement when the one-off adjustment is stripped out. The Utility Regulator does not feature in this Budget because the 90% Vote on Account was already given to it in the Budget Act 2020. We have engaged with the Utility Regulator's office, and it has confirmed that it is content with the approach that we are taking.

Other issues were raised. Matthew O'Toole raised the issue of the review of priorities post COVID. That is the

trajectory that the Executive are on. In the limited time that we had prior to the COVID restrictions kicking in, the Executive met on a number of occasions off campus, if you like, to discuss prioritisation, the general financial picture and what we would want to achieve in the time ahead. When I look back through my diary now, I see a number of dates for Executive awaydays stroked out. We had planned further engagements over this period. I have no doubt that we will get back to that, because that is the approach that this five-party Executive wanted to take.

Allied to all of that are, of course, the issues around the fiscal council and the idea that we want more taxation powers. I will come back to the point that Mr Carroll raised.

He is right that the non-domestic rates holiday is probably the only significant lever that we have. However, bear in mind that, as regards business going forward beyond this, it is a very significant loss of revenue income for the Executive to give that holiday for the entirety of the year; it is four months for all businesses and a further eight months for those targeted interventions. However, as regards support for businesses, we also included as part of the Budget an effective business rate reduction of approximately 18%.

7.15 pm

He also asked about borrowing powers, as I think Andrew Muir did — or perhaps that was in the earlier debate; this has gone on so long that I am starting to merge some of the conversations from one debate to the next. To date, nearly £2,489 million has been borrowed and the outstanding borrowing is £1,680 million. The interest charges are a direct cost to the resource DEL and are £47.9 million in this financial year. The principal payments are a first call on the regional rates income. The Executive have the ability to borrow up to £200 million each year. There were some suggestions in relation to other borrowing that may be available but, clearly, the priority is to spend the COVID-19 allocations that we have and to look at the reprioritisation of money that we will not spend because of the restrictions on each Department before accruing any more debt through borrowing.

On the economic recovery, there was also some discussion on the access to financial transactions capital. Other people made that point in relation to housing and social housing build. Clearly, over the last number of years, that has traditionally fallen below the level that we want to see. Part of the reason for that is that the designated Housing Executive legislation was to have been brought through Westminster to effect change there, and that did not happen. The Communities Minister has signalled that she wants to take forward such legislation, so I anticipate that the uptake of financial transactions capital will increase in the next Budget. We intend to commission further work to work with Departments on that.

Andrew Muir made a couple of other points. On the economic recovery, I agree with the social partnership approaches in the safe return to work. That will require investment. Rachel Woods asked what we are doing to assist businesses on the safe return to work. Part of the reason for the directed rates support was to recognise those businesses that would have most difficulty returning to work and perhaps feel the economic impact the longest, particularly hospitality, tourism, leisure and certain sections of retail. That rates relief was, in effect, money

that they would not spend, which is a substantial amount when you take it across the whole range of businesses, and permit some of them to invest in the limited return to business that they will be able to experience over the coming months. So, there was support for them in that regard. Of course, we are also looking at procurement. We have sent a signal around Departments that they should be ready to assist in the return to work of construction. Construction makes up about 25% of our economy. A substantial portion of construction comes from public-sector contracts. There is, I think, over £1 billion-worth of public-sector contracts sitting in the system ready to go. We have asked Departments to go and look at that and take them to the point of readiness to award and allocate so that the Executive can play our role in getting construction back up and working again, because we are the larger procurement of construction and it makes a very significant input to our economy.

A number of Members mentioned ideas on future working. This coronavirus experience has accelerated a number of things. One of those is the quickness with which a system can react. Others referred to how the system is built on red tape. We have proved that, if we need to react, we can set aside the red tape and, through remote and agile working, make a contribution not only to people having a better work-life balance — by not having to travel in and out of Belfast every day, as I and many others do — but to reducing carbon emissions, creating a greener economy and reducing congestion issues, particularly around the city of Belfast. Prior to the outbreak of the virus, the Department of Finance, which has responsibility for personnel, had been doing a series of studies on where people came from to work in some of buildings on this estate. The idea was to have satellite locations right across the North to allow people to work closer to home at least two or three days a week. Saving those journeys would make an economic contribution to towns and cities across the North and reduce the carbon footprint, travel-time lost and travel expense. So, that idea of remote and agile working was already in the system. The experience of this period and the upsurge in IT provision to civil servants will accelerate that, as it will in relation to a number of matters.

Jonathan Buckley asked about cancer services in COVID times. As the expected intervention in relation to COVID has begun to reduce in the health service requirements, the discussion and the advice that we are being given by the Health Minister, who gives us a question-and-answer session at every Executive meeting, is about how we get back to the provision of the other critical services. So, I know that the minds of the Health Department are looking at all of that.

He also mentioned corporation tax from a different angle. Setting aside the corporation tax issue, which was never the cornerstone of any economic policy that I was involved in, we are going to have to recognise that, in the short to medium term, FDI is probably not going to be possible. We are going to have to look at the role of Invest NI — I am sure that the Economy Minister addressed that in the paper that she provided to the Executive — and support local indigenous businesses. That goes back to another point that Sinéad Ennis made on security of supply, which is becoming more critical than cheaper prices. The rush in procurement, not in foreign investment, was to get cheaper goods from the other side of the world. Similarly, we are coming into a different economic reality on the other side

of this. That will not be about chasing FDI, because it will not be available to us in the short to medium term, and we need to concentrate on local businesses.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way and for his willingness to look at creative solutions, whether it is FDI or something else. He will bear witness to the fact that cutting the rates bill, although it might be something for some to shout about, for businesses during COVID-19 is crucial to their survival post-COVID. That is a perfect example of how creative thinking on taxation can help businesses now and in the future.

Mr Murphy: I absolutely agree. I was just making the point about the emphasis on FDI, the need for us all to rethink the priorities prior to March, the need for us to recognise how the global economy, and our position in that, has changed, and the need to ensure that we support local economic recovery as best we can.

Caoimhe Archibald made a number of points on the principles of recovery, which I agree with, including workers' rights, remote and agile working, green climate recovery, looking at the tax loopholes, which I am happy to press with Treasury, and supply chain security, which feeds into the point that I was just making.

Gordon Dunne raised the ongoing support for manufacturing. Of course, manufacturing continues to benefit from manufacturing relief, which is worth 70%. It had the entirety of measures, which did not apply in Britain, because manufacturing, commercial and service industries did not get rates holidays in Britain. All sectors of business will have a rates holiday for four months after which manufacturing will continue to benefit from the rates reduction that is unique to here; it is not experienced anywhere else.

Sinead McLaughlin is away, but one of the points that she raised has me wondering. She asserted that Magee and Ulster University are deeply uncertain, as she is, on the next steps. There was extensive consultation and dialogue with Magee over the last number of weeks, and I was advised that they were certain about, and supportive of, the steps that were taken and were pleased that it gave them a sense of security. I will have to go back and check with those who, at a very senior level in the Executive, were speaking to them if that is now not the case.

Karen Mullan's point on childcare was well made. The Executive decided to include the childcare sector in the rates holiday until the end of the financial year. We recognised that it was another sector that was going to struggle due to the social-distancing measures; the sector effectively collapsed over the period of lockdown and will struggle to get up and going.

John Blair asked about the cost arrangements for the protocols for Brexit. Of course, we did get some Brexit no deal money last year ahead of the Executive coming back, some of which was able to be used. It was retained, and, obviously, no deal then did not happen, although a version of no deal could well happen in the time ahead. Clearly, the Treasury has committed to provide any spend that is required to give effect to Brexit, so we will hold it to that in the time ahead.

Declan McAleer, on behalf of the Agriculture Committee, raised the issue of COVID support, and, obviously, we have provided £25 million. The Agriculture Minister did

update us regularly about the pressures across all the sectors in agriculture, so I will assume that he wants to ensure that there is a fairer distribution of that level of support across all sectors, because, clearly, there is a recognition that all the sectors in agriculture are suffering as a consequence of this.

Colin McGrath raised the issue of victims' pensions, and he had me confused at one stage. I agree with him entirely that the victims' pension policy was a British Government policy. It was legislated for by them, and the suffering of many of the victims that they are addressing happened under the watch of direct rule. Of course, I am very firmly of the view that the costs of that should be met by the British Government. He said in his remarks that the Executive should not have to pay this on their own, so I am not sure whether he means that we should pay a proportion of that. If he thinks that we should, what proportion is he suggesting? Certainly, it is my view that it is their responsibility, even under the policy rules that the British Government operate by. It is their policy, they devised it and they legislated for it, so they are responsible for any payment that comes out of that. That is the argument that we have made very clearly to them. It is unfortunate that the people who have suffered the most are caught in the middle of this argument, but they would not be if the British Government adhered to their own rules that they operate under.

I have to say that the idea that a myth, if it is repeated often enough, becomes a fact applies to some of the SDLP spokespeople who repeat that following our three years without an Assembly, Budget allocations to the Departments that are run by the larger parties have been made, with the SDLP saying that its members will scrutinise to make sure that that does not happen again. I am not aware that the departmental budgets were allocated on that basis in previous Executives, and I spoke with your leadership throughout the three years that we were without an Assembly. I know that the leadership of your party changed its view at times, but there were many times when it was fully supportive of no return to the Assembly under the conditions that applied at that time. So, on the idea that you are absolved of any responsibility for any of that and the notion that there was a budgetary carve-up among the larger parties, that would not have been acceptable. I am sure that the Assembly would not have accepted a vote that resulted in that.

I agree with Colin McGrath about a Brexit extension. As Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, he will know and I do not have to tell him that that is not an Executive position because there are differing views in the Executive. He knows that the parties that favoured Remain agree on the position that there should be an extension to the Brexit discussions, even though we do not agree with the outcome of that. Nonetheless, to try to conclude those discussions in a fashion that does not take any account of the loss of momentum that there has been over this last period will lead us to, I think, a more damaging outcome than would otherwise have been the case, and I think that we will ship some damage as a consequence of Brexit.

Kellie Armstrong asked me about what will happen post-October in relation to the finances. When we reach October, we will have accessed up to 80% of our Vote on Account, and we are, obviously, working to bring a Main Estimates and associated Budget Bill to the Assembly in

the early autumn. That will allow us to access all available cash and also to access receipts and accruing resources that are not available at present. So, it is not just about the remaining 20% but money that the Executive would accrue over the course of that. We also have further spring Supplementary Estimates before the end of the financial year to allow for further monitoring rounds that will take place throughout the course of the year. So, there is a plan in place to manage all of this. No doubt, it will be challenging, but there is a plan in place to do all of this.

She mentioned a range of issues that we need to spend on, and, on reprioritisation, I think that she maybe echoed what the Chair of the Justice Committee said in a previous debate, where he said that Committees do have an important role to make sure that Departments are not sitting on money on the off-chance that they might spend it and that they have a long hard look at that. That is what we have been asking them to do, and I have to say that the response has been patchy.

We need Committees to perform a function in that regard if we are to ensure that we have the sufficient funds at the end of the financial year to deal with all of the things and the ongoing effect of the downturn that COVID-19 will undoubtedly bring. As I say, I have addressed some of the issues that she mentioned about financial transaction capital.

7.30 pm

On the issue of spending in Northern Ireland Water and Translink, we have given the largest allocation in the Department for Infrastructure's history and clearly it has to set its priorities within that capital allocation. I know that the Infrastructure Minister is aware of the need for investment in Northern Ireland Water and Translink. The status of Northern Ireland Water is changing. When I was the Minister for Regional Development, I brought a proposition to the Executive to change the status of NIW to achieve the outcome that she argued for. I never got backing from a single other party to achieve a change to the status of NIW and the issue went back onto the shelf. I wish the Minister for Infrastructure luck this time around, if she can do something about that.

With regard to the points that Rachel Woods made about accelerated passage, we have just had the debate — I cannot just ramstam through accelerated passage. Not only does the Committee have to agree, after having had discussion with officials and some sight of what we are trying to do, but the Assembly has to vote to set aside Standing Orders to allow for accelerated passage. I agree with her that it is not ideal and it is not the way that we want to do business, but it is not undemocratic because I cannot do it unless the Assembly votes by cross-community support to agree that we can run the Budget process in a way that has not been done before. It is not a way that I want to revisit again because I want to ensure that it is done in the correct way and that we are not faced with circumstances such as we are.

The Member also asked about PPE requirements if there is a second wave. We continue to actively pursue significant and sufficient PPE to meet our demands in the time ahead, and I am doing that alongside the Health Minister. We hope to be able to see that through in the not too distant future.

In terms of the local council COVID-19 allocation, we got £50 million in Barnett consequentials, so that is a measure of what was given to local councils in Britain. Local councils in Britain, as you will understand, deliver education and social services, which are not delivered by our local councils here. When those were stripped out, we had a Barnett allocation of £20 million and that was given to local government. The Department for Communities will work out the formula by which that is distributed and obviously local government will be involved in discussions and the priorities to which they will put that money. We certainly understand the challenges that are faced by local government and we want to support them.

Miss Woods mentioned a whole range of other issues and for every one of them her answer was more resource. If I answer them collectively, the very short answer is no. We do not have enough resources to cover all of the issues that she mentioned. We have limited resources and we have given away, as a consequence of supporting businesses, significant access to revenue that is available to the Executive over the course of the year. We will not have enough resources to do all of the things that she asked us to do, and that means that we have to prioritise. That is what these debates and discussions in the Committees are for and to recognise that we have a very limited financial allocation. We need to prioritise it and we need to agree on those priorities. Where they are wrong, we should be criticised, and we are open to criticism, but we cannot make the pot any bigger. As a matter of fact, because of the financial supports that we have put out there, we have actually shrunk the pot over the last number of weeks, but everybody told us that it was the right thing to do to ensuring that businesses did not go out of business, and I am sure that she does not disagree with that.

I fully agree with her when she talks about a sustainable, fair and just recovery — that is exactly what I would like to see. I recognise that I am part of a five-party Executive and that those agreements have to be won around the Executive table, but I assure her that that will be my endeavour over the time ahead.

On the NDNA commitments that she referred to, and I think that I remarked on this in a previous debate, no sooner had we agreed, and we all agreed our political agreements and we hold to them as part of NDNA, the financial commitments were then reneged on immediately. They were not a wish list and they were not pie in the sky. They were worked through — I sat in on the meetings — with senior officials in the Department of Finance, the head of the Civil Service and senior officials in the NIO. We were told at every stage that those commitments would be met by the British Government as part of any agreement that was reached, but they were very quickly disowned on the other side of that. We have not given up on that and I still intend to take up that issue with the Treasury. It went by unnoticed that we recently managed to secure the confidence and supply money that was agreed by the DUP and the Conservative Party, so that was a welcome contribution to our Budget. I do not intend to give up on those things.

Gerry Carroll was the last speaker. He quoted some of the other speakers. Of course I agree with him. It is our party policy. One of the differences is that when we make arguments for that, particularly in the South, we have to cost all those issues. If we are going to make a contribution to a Budget debate in the South and we

criticise the propositions and approach of the Government down there we cost those with the Department of Finance and we put up an alternative Budget.

I recommend to him that at some stage he do that. He is entitled to criticise and that is what he is here for, to represent the people who voted for him. However, at some stage you have to say, "Here are my priorities, this is what they will cost and here is what you are spending. That is what I disagree with and that money could go there, with a better outcome". I look forward to hearing that from him, at some stage.

In relation to corporation tax, it was not the cornerstone of any policy. It was an agreement, and if he reads the Stormont House Agreement, in which it was mentioned, it was very clear that it was in the context of it being considered affordable by the Executive. Clearly, since that —

Mr Carroll: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I will just finish this point and then I will give way, if everyone is happy to stay here all evening.

Clearly, since that point, the Executive has considered it not to be affordable. I said very early on in my position as Finance Minister that it was not something that I was pursuing, and I think that the Economy Minister said that she agreed with that position.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for giving way. Why did the Executive spend at least £417,000 in preparing for a tax reduction? I think that was revealed in an answer to a question from Mr Aiken a few years ago, including the development of new IT systems? I welcome it if he has changed his position, but surely that was a cornerstone policy of the Executive for many years?

Mr Murphy: Corporation tax was no cornerstone policy. It was something that the Executive considered in terms of its affordability and clearly it was never considered to be affordable and is not being pursued.

As I said, we have a responsibility where we make arguments from an opposition point of view to cost them and present them so that they can be scrutinised. I invite him to do something similar. I realise that he may not have the same resources available to him, but some attempt at doing that would be welcome.

I am sure that you will be delighted to know that I am going to draw my remarks to a conclusion. I have tried to respond to as many of the relevant issues raised as possible. As always, the debate has been very useful, with many significant points raised, and I am thankful to Members for that. It is imperative that the legislation debated today continues its passage through the Assembly so that public services here can be delivered without delay or interruption.

In conclusion, I ask Members to support the Bill, thereby authorising spending on public services by Departments in 2020-21.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that as this is a Budget Bill the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Carroll, and Miss Woods if you were the other one? No, you were not, Miss Woods.

Mr Carroll, if you would like me to record that you voted no, that is now in Hansard and we can avoid a Division of the House. That is now on the record that you were against.

Question put a second time.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 5/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. Amendments to the Bill may be submitted to the Bill Office up to 12 noon on Wednesday 27 May.

Item number 4 on the Order Paper is the Adjournment. Before I put the question, I remind Members that the next plenary session of the Assembly is on Monday 1 June.

Adjourned at 7.39 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 1 June 2020

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Death of George Floyd

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Gerry Carroll has been given leave to make a statement on the death of George Floyd that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called to speak, they should stand in their place and continue to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes in which to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has been concluded.

Mr Carroll: First, I express my sympathy to the family of George Floyd on the death of their loved one. The footage of a police officer putting his knee on the neck of George Floyd, suffocating and killing him while he shouted, "I can't breathe", shines a brutal light onto the reality of racism and police violence in the United States today. That racism, unfortunately, has been emboldened by the words and actions of Donald Trump, who gave the green light to continue shooting people down in cold blood in America, after this brutal killing. Trump, of course, is a man who has done nothing about the continual violence of white supremacists and racist organisations whilst giving them a nod and a wink along the way. It is a cruel irony, is it not, and a true reflection of life in the United States today that a black man can be murdered after being accused of forging documents, while wealthy whites, through tax evasion and other schemes, forge their way to billionaire and trillionaire status, exploiting the labour of black people along the way?

Today, we express our sorrow and anger at the murder of George Floyd, but unfortunately that has been a common theme in recent years, and we also have to remember Eric Garner, Michael Brown and all those killed in cold blood. Unfortunately and tragically, there are too many names to mention them today.

Since the brutal killing of George Floyd, we have witnessed protests across the United States. People have been bravely standing up to and defying the brutal, militarised police state of the United States. On behalf of all socialists, all progressives and all radicals in Ireland, I extend solidarity and support to all the people out on the streets demonstrating against the racist, murdering machine in the United States. In the 1960s, the black civil rights struggle directly inspired the struggle for change here, and people here are still inspired by the ongoing fight for equality, dignity, rights and justice for black and minority communities in the United States. One world: one struggle. Black lives matter.

Mr O'Toole: I thank Gerry Carroll for raising this Matter of the Day. Over the weekend, we will all have seen the images from the United States that began with the horrific murder of George Floyd, a black man who came to his death with the knee of a police officer across his neck. It is shocking and appalling and it matters to us here. It matters to us all, because, as Gerry Carroll said, black lives matter. They matter in the United States. I feel quite a profound connection to the United States because I have spent some time there. It is true that there is an endemic and deep strain of racism that has affected the American republic since the state was founded and we cannot forget about that. As a jurisdiction here, and as an island that is deeply and intimately linked with the United States, we cannot turn a blind eye to the reality of deep and endemic racism there.

During the Irish famine, the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass paid a visit to Ireland. He lectured all over this island, including in what is now Northern Ireland, in Holywood, Bangor and Lisburn. He said that while the Irish had been among the worst perpetrators of prejudice against people of colour in North America, they themselves had also experienced prejudice and injustice. Mr Carroll mentioned the links between the civil rights movement in North America and the civil rights movement here in Northern Ireland. The reason why Frederick Douglass's words resonate still today is that responsibility falls on all of us, not just in North America but across the globe, to ensure that we do everything to root out racism, which is a cancer, not just in the United States but across societies everywhere. It is incumbent on all of us to do everything that we can to ensure that people of colour are treated properly and that the centuries-old injustice that has afflicted them, certainly in North America and elsewhere, is properly addressed.

What has happened in North America this weekend is profoundly important all over the world, and I am glad that, today, the Northern Ireland Assembly, which is profoundly connected to North America and to the United States, will issue a strong call in solidarity with the people who are protesting there today.

Mr Givan: I offer my condolences to the family of George Floyd; a father to daughters who are grieving and his loss will be felt most keenly by them. I have been reading up on George, and he was known as a gentle giant. He was six foot six; this was a big man. He had a glittering career in football and basketball at Jack Yates High School and led them to championship finals. It is important that we also remember George for the man. He can, and is being used for political statements to attack institutions. Rightly, people need to point out where there are failings. What

happened to George was appalling; everyone can see that. The way that he was treated was appalling. The officer responsible has been arrested and charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. Due process now, I hope, takes its course and executes justice very speedily, and it is vital that that happens, but what is not right is the mass destruction that has taken place. The destruction of property and the encouragement of that kind of protest is something that I would not want to be party to. I would not want the Assembly to send that message out.

I condemn what has happened to George but I also condemn the way in which the protests have now turned into a violent mob and are being used to attack institutions and the President of the United States and so on. Let us remember George, because it is important that we give a flavour of who we are talking about and not just use him to talk about other things. I read that George did a lot of work in Houston. He worked in the projects, as they are called in the United States, in deprived areas. He was known as a person of peace, and as a mentor to a generation of young men. His pastor in the Resurrection Church in Houston's Cuney, known as "the Bricks", paid a tribute to him. He said:

"George Floyd was a person of peace sent from the Lord that helped the gospel go forward in a place that I never lived in."

He brought the Church to the people. There is a story that George pushed the baptism tank into the projects on the understanding that people there would make a decision of faith and be baptised where they lived without needing to go to the church.

George is to be remembered for the contribution that he made as a Christian, as someone who tackled disadvantage and as someone who brought the Church to the people. We need to see justice for the terrible way in which his life was ended.

Ms Sheerin: I echo some of the comments that have been made around the Chamber. We need to be careful about how the narrative of what happened has been portrayed. George Floyd's death is not the first to be captured on a smartphone and beamed around the world through social media. Such events in themselves are tragedies. Systemic racism, not just one bad apple in an institution, caused his death. Systemic racism, like any form of discrimination, is the disease that hurts not only those who feel the blatant and explicit brutality, but those who have to suffer the comments, jokes and narrative that are made and legitimised by action such as that which happened to George Floyd.

In the North of Ireland, where our freedom fighters and civil rights organisations were inspired by the demonstrations by the American civil rights movement of the '60s, we stand in solidarity with those whose struggle for equality is ongoing. As a child of the '90s, I am lucky that the freedoms that were fought for here in the '60s and '70s have allowed me to live a life without harassment, but it is deeply unsettling to see that, in America, where freedom riders and marchers staged sit-ins and took the same brave stand, their children's children are not afforded the same luxuries. Ar dheis Dé go raibh sé.

Mr Beattie: The images beamed around the world of George Floyd being restrained by a Minnesota policeman — pleading with that policeman to take his knee off his

neck, fighting for breath and, ultimately, dying — are truly horrific. The police officer who perpetrated that was, rightly, arrested and has, rightly, been charged with murder. He will go through due process because he shamed his office on that day. However, it is more disturbing that three of his colleagues stood and watched while it happened. They are as much to blame as the officer who pressed his knee on the neck of the man who was lying helpless on the floor.

George Floyd was a man of colour. He was a black man in a racially charged US where black men are more likely to die in this way, but I did not see a colour; I saw a man — a helpless man murdered on our screens. I cannot stand here and support the violence that happened afterwards: I cannot, and I will not. All such violence does is create more dead, more devastation, more injured, more victims. We need to remember George, if we are going to support the people who want justice for him.

Ms Armstrong: I rise with a lot of sorrow. On behalf of myself and the Alliance Party, I pass on our condolences to George's family and his community. As others have said, the use of police force and the eight minutes and 46 seconds that that knee was on the neck of a person — the last three of which when George was unresponsive — are shocking to see, read about and hear about. We have absolute empathy with those who have felt anger. However, I draw everyone to what George's brother has said. George's brother Terrence Floyd has condemned the violence that is happening.

He has condemned the protests and has said that his brother stood for peace. He has asked everyone to channel anger elsewhere, and that anger should be focused on the lack of leadership that is current in the United States and in so many other places across the world, where things like racism are taking hold meaning that people are not treated equally.

12.15 pm

Instead of having a president in America who is calm, courageous, principled and has great leadership, we have a person who fans the flames of division, racism and bigotry. There are a lot of things that America could do better and one of them would be channelling that anger in a different way. There is a lot of difference between a protest and looting, raiding and violence for violence's sake/. We absolutely condemn the violence that is taking place.

It is time that we take the attention back to what happened. This is not a police versus community issue. It shows that there has to be transparency and accountability. We know full well here in this place that our past has shown where police got things wrong. Now, thank goodness, we have professionalism and a force that has improved and that has learned from mistakes.

I know that the officer has been arrested and charged, but it is time that the whole police force in the Minnesota area and other parts of America take a cold, hard look at the type of force that they use against people. As Mr Beattie said, we did not see colour, we saw a man dying in the street with the knee of another person on his neck. That has to stop. That is not right. George Floyd lived until he was 46. His family is now grieving, and we are very sorry for that.

Mr Allister: Anyone who watched the footage could not only be aghast but outraged at what they saw: the

deliberate actions leading to the death, nay the murder, of George Floyd. It is right and appropriate, and I am glad of it, that the perpetrator has been charged with offences, and others look to me as if they likewise should be charged. However, what we then witnessed is the exploitation of that incident to unleash, by forces of anarchy, sheer terror on the streets of the United States.

I was very disappointed that the Member who raised this matter did not have one word of condemnation for that anarchy, which is not honouring the memory of George Floyd or anyone else but is seeking to exploit the situation for the advantage of anarchists and the far left, with no regard to the memory or the life or the testimony of George Floyd. Instead of condemning that, Mr Carroll told us that he was in solidarity with those bravely standing up to and defying the forces in the United States. He told us that that inspired things here. Sadly, it probably did.

One of the things, of course, that we will remember the United States for most in terms of own Troubles is the dollars that funded the weapons that armed vile terrorists. Ms Sheerin, they were not freedom fighters. They were vile terrorists of the lowest order, who inflicted the most horrendous killings in this community. Indeed, I have to say that I have no recollection of the United States Congress or any other congress in any state very often raising issues in defence of the innocent in Northern Ireland. I do not recall condemnation of the bloodthirsty murder of the corporals in Northern Ireland echoing around the legislatures of the United States. Today, however, we, as human beings, do condemn the murder of George.

I only wish that that condemnation had been reciprocated when we were the victims of horrendous terrorism.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak.

The Member should rise in her place.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I had risen at the start.

I thank my colleague for bringing the matter to the Chamber today. Racism thrives in the company of silence. The tragedy of the death of George Floyd, who suffered after a police officer kneeled on his neck for seven minutes, in spite of his pleas to stop, has rightly caused anger and protest in Minneapolis and across the world. I stood on the same streets that people are protesting on not nine months ago, as part of the global climate strike outside Saint Paul City Hall. I visited many of the shops that have been looted. People whom I keep in touch with who live in the city tell me that the protests are generally supported and understandable, touched off by some things that had been brewing for a while. What Minnesota has never seen before, however, is the level of violence.

We in the Green Party stand in solidarity with all those, including the Black Lives Matter movement, who campaign against endemic institutional racism, fascism and police brutality. We have seen images of police in the US using cars as weapons, firing tear gas, beating protesters and targeting journalists. That is all the result of systemic racism, inequality and a populist, neo-fascist regime in the form of the Trump Administration. A friend in Minneapolis emailed me on Saturday night, stating:

"If police stopped tweeting racist things to fan the flames, we'd be getting on even better."

He said that to see those tweets coming through in the middle of the night, with the police station and the city burning, was reproachable.

We call for justice for George Floyd and justice for all who have been wronged by those who were sworn to protect them, as this is not the first time that this has happened. We must honour his memory and that of others by continuing to work harder than ever to end racism, tackle inequalities and build a better future for all.

I wish to mention some of the last words recorded from Mr Floyd:

"It's my face, man. I didn't do nothing serious, man. Please, please, please, I can't breathe. I cannot breathe, officer. Don't kill me."

We have a choice. We can raise our voices and join against the systemic and institutionalised racism across the world and push for those in power to do the same.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Consideration Stage

Moved. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group its four clauses for the Question on stand part, followed by the two schedules and the long title.

Question, That clauses 1 to 4 stand part of the Bill, put and agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Carroll has voted against the clauses standing part, but I think that the Ayes have it.

Clauses 1 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Question, That schedules 1 and 2 be agreed, put and agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Carroll has voted against again. That is recorded in Hansard.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

Question, That the long title be agreed, put and agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Quelle surprise: Mr Carroll again.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker. Amendments for Further Consideration Stage of the Bill may be submitted to the Bill Office up until 9.30 am tomorrow.

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Accelerated Passage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments — ah, Minister.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): That the Housing (Amendment) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister for Communities to open the debate on the motion.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thank you, and I thank everyone in the Chamber. I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly on the motion. There are compelling grounds for the use of accelerated passage for the legislation. It is, obviously, not a decision that I take lightly, but it is necessary.

The Bill is necessary, following the 2016 decision by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to classify registered housing associations locally to the public sector for the purposes of government accounting. Similar decisions were made by ONS on housing associations in the other jurisdictions. On the day that the decision was announced, the Executive agreed that the Department for Communities should bring forward proposals to achieve a reversal of the ONS decision.

As required under Standing Order 42(4), I wish to explain why I am seeking accelerated passage and the consequences, if it is not granted. I ask for accelerated passage for the Bill because of the financial implications if we cannot achieve a timely reversal of the ONS decision. The ONS decision means that the borrowing of registered housing associations counts as public sector borrowing, and the Department must provide cover for that borrowing. However, doing so for registered housing associations would impact adversely on our current approach to building social homes, in which the associations match fund the capital grant made by the Department through their borrowing in the private sector. The loss of that approach would see the volume of social homes built each year reduced by almost 50%.

The British Treasury has allowed a derogation in relation to the accounting impacts of the ONS decision, but that is contingent on our doing what is necessary as quickly as possible to facilitate a reversal of the ONS decision. The derogation has already lasted a year longer here than in Scotland and Wales. Whilst it has been renewed for 2020-21, it is highly unlikely that the Treasury will extend it any further. More urgently, with the classification to the public sector, registered housing associations lost their eligibility to access financial transactions capital (FTC). That government loan scheme has been used in the last few years to support increased homeownership through affordable housing programmes. The co-ownership scheme has supported over 2,000 households into homeownership in the last two years. However, without FTC, the scheme will be forced to close to new applicants unless an alternative source of funding can be found. Over the last two years, the Department has been able to find that funding with significant support from the Department of Finance. However, the uncertain funding picture is not beneficial to co-ownership. My officials have estimated

that to maintain the co-ownership scheme at its current level will require an additional capital funding of £3 million per month. This issue is unaffected by the derogation, which is purely about accounting practice. Without accelerated passage there is a risk that the derogation will not be renewed in 2021-22, and the cost of maintaining the co-ownership scheme for the current financial year will have been met by my Department at an additional cost of £36 million. Even with accelerated passage, we will need to find £3 million per month to maintain the co-ownership scheme until the ONS decision can be reversed.

Of course, the situation we find ourselves in brings added urgency to the pressures of the Bill. The additional funding will prove much more difficult to find as a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Of course, the economic benefits of the reclassification of housing associations here will be of huge importance due to the need for recovery vehicles once we begin to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis. We need those benefits as soon as possible.

In accordance with Standing Order 42(3), I appeared before the Committee for Communities on 13 May to explain the need for accelerated passage for the Bill and to outline the consequences of it not being granted. I thank the Chair and the Committee for their recognition of the need to move the Bill as quickly as possible and for their support in seeking Assembly approval for accelerated passage. Members will have the opportunity to raise issues in detail at the Second Stage of the Bill, and I look forward to the engagement.

12.30 pm

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): As the Minister said, she briefed the Committee on 13 May on the reasons why the Bill is required to proceed under accelerated passage. Members recognise the urgent need for legislation, so that the ONS will reverse its decision to classify registered housing associations as public sector. This classification has an effect on how money is borrowed and, without the current derogation, it would be classified as public-sector borrowing. That would then impact on the budget for building social houses, something that we can ill afford at this time, when our housing waiting lists are so high.

We also heard from the Minister and her officials that, whilst the Treasury extended the derogation from the ONS decision until March next year, it was dependent on legislation being brought forward as quickly as possible to reverse the ONS decision. The Minister made the Committee aware that the Treasury has informed the Department that it is highly unlikely that another derogation will be granted. The Committee agreed that it is therefore imperative that we get this legislation through as quickly as possible.

Another factor to be taken into account is the potential impact on the successful co-ownership scheme. The ONS classification meant that housing associations are no longer eligible to access financial transactions capital, which is a Government loan scheme. As a result, the Department has been spending £3 million per month to maintain the scheme. Whilst we all welcome the support from the Department for co-ownership, that £3 million per month could be used to meet the many other challenging priorities.

As I indicated, the Committee is supportive of the Bill being granted accelerated passage. However, Committee members

had questions about the Bill and, with your approval, I will address those at Second Stage. It is imperative that the Bill progresses quickly through the House, particularly as, even after Royal Assent, it will take time for the ONS to reverse its decision. The Committee was told that, with a fair wind, the decision could be taken by September. At the Committee meeting, the Minister acknowledged that this is not her preferred way of handling legislation, and although most Committee members would prefer the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill in greater detail, members are supportive of the motion to allow accelerated passage.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind Members that if they wish to participate, they should rise in their place or indicate that to me in some other way: try to catch my eye.

Ms Ennis: I agree with the comments from the Minister and the Chair of the Committee on the need for accelerated passage for the Bill. I know that it is not the Minister's preferred vehicle, but it has to be noted that the Committee for Communities accepted the need for accelerated passage to reverse the ONS decision to classify housing associations as public bodies. We know that failure to grant accelerated passage will have consequences, not least financial implications. As the Chair said, it will draw a cost of £3 million per month to keep the co-ownership scheme open to new applications while the Bill progresses.

I welcome the Minister's determination on this issue because, as the Chair said, it is very unlikely that the British Treasury will extend the current derogation for another year. It is, therefore, imperative that the Bill passes through the Assembly by accelerated passage. We support that.

Mr Durkan: As social justice spokesperson for the SDLP, a party whose very *raison d'être* is the pursuit of social justice, I cannot let today pass without commenting on recent and ongoing events across the Atlantic Ocean. I apologise that I missed the Matter of the Day, but give me a wee bit of latitude, please, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

The murder of George Floyd, an unarmed and innocent black man, by Minneapolis police officers has shone a light once more on the injustice and intolerance that is still rife in the world. We, sadly, are no strangers to that, in this wee corner of it. We do not condone the rioting or looting that many cities now suffer, but we condemn 100% the institutional racism that has given rise to it.

We stand in sympathy with George's family and friends, and in solidarity with all those across the world who strive for a fair, just and equal society. We are motivated to do all we can, as leaders, to eradicate injustice in our community.

One area where injustice remains is in housing. In 2020, thousands of families and individuals suffer homelessness and housing stress. We have a statutory and moral duty to provide homes for those people. The Housing (Amendment) Bill is an essential tool to enable us, through housing associations, to build and provide more social homes. Therefore, I want to put it firmly on the record that we support the essence of the Bill.

When the Minister came to the Committee to outline her intention to use accelerated passage to get the legislation through as quickly as possible, I, like other Committee members, expressed regret that we would not be able

to scrutinise fully such an important piece of legislation. Ultimately, we acquiesced to the Minister's request, but over the weekend I have given the matter a bit more thought. In order to ensure that the ONS reclassification of housing associations is reversed and to realise the huge social benefits that it will bring, as well as the significant financial benefit to the Executive, the legislation needs to be in place by 31 March 2021. That is 31 March 2021. Are we saying that it is beyond our ability — that it is even beyond our ambition — to get the Bill through the normal legislative process by then?

Consultation has been done previously on the right-to-buy element of the Bill, but then apparently disregarded. As a Committee, we have received a briefing from the Minister and her officials over the phone, which is no fault of the Minister, her officials or the Committee, but we have not had a chance to get evidence from or question the sector. We have not even received an opinion from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

The Minister and Executive have a job to legislate. As Committee members and MLAs, we have a job to scrutinise. The Bill has aspects that certainly warrant further examination and consideration. We will touch on them as the debate moves to Second Stage. We need to get it right in order to maximise its benefit to the people whom we are paid to represent.

I do not want us to take the time to unpick the Bill, but to improve it. I apologise to the Chair and fellow Committee members, and to the Minister, for not making the case more strongly at Committee, but I do not think that we can use the COVID-19 crisis as cover for merely rubber-stamping far from perfect legislation. For three years, we were not here doing our job. Let us do it properly now. My party will not support accelerated passage.

Mr Allen: The Minister and, indeed, Committee colleagues have outlined the rationale and reason for accelerated passage. I will not rehearse those arguments. Social housing is, indeed, essential for many people across Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, many are unable to access it. Any detrimental impact on the ability to build social housing would be catastrophic. With that and, indeed, the mitigating circumstances — I believe that the COVID-19 crisis is a huge factor in taking the Bill back to ONS and going through the various stages — my party will support accelerated passage.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Member has indicated that they wish to speak at this stage. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

I also remind Members that we continue to uphold social distancing, and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 68; Noes 15.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins,

Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist:

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Buckley and Mr Gildernew.

NOES

Nationalist

Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole.

Unionist:

Mr Allister.

Other

Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Durkan and Ms McLaughlin.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>[81.9%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>[70.3%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>[97.2%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>[70.0%]</i>

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley [Teller, Ayes], Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan [Teller, Noes], Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin [Teller, Noes], Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew [Teller, Ayes], Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Miss Woods voted for Ms Bailey.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Housing (Amendment) Bill (Northern Ireland) 2020 proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few seconds while we change the personnel at the Table and give the Minister time to come into the Chamber.

During the Division, a Member raised an issue with me, and it is appropriate that we put something on the record about it before I call the Minister.

When a Member is speaking, it is considered a discourtesy to that Member to walk in front of them. There were a couple of instances of that happening in the earlier debate. I appreciate that we are all a bit rusty and that this is a new experience for a lot of people, but it is considered a discourtesy to a Member, if they are addressing the Assembly, for another Member to walk in front of them. It can be very distracting.

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill [NIA 6/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated a time limit to this debate.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thank you, Members. To go back over what was previously said, the ONS published its decision on 29 September 2016 to change the classification of registered housing associations from the private sector to the public sector. Obviously, at that time, the Executive started work to facilitate the reversal. The Executive effectively repeated that commitment in New Decade, New Approach, and that committed us to bring forward legislation, which is urgently needed, to reclassify housing associations as external to the public sector to ensure the continuation of the co-ownership housing scheme and the building of new social housing.

The Executive decided to seek the reversal of the classification to its development of new social homes through housing associations. A private sector classification has long enabled housing associations to complement, with their borrowings, the capital that the Executive have allocated to the development of new social homes. Those borrowings did not score as public borrowing due to housing associations' private sector classification, but they would under a public-sector classification.

Under the Treasury's borrowing rules, DFC would need to retain in its capital allocation a sum equivalent to an association's annual borrowing while it is classified to the public sector. That would entirely remove the advantage to the Government and the social housing sector of an association's ability to fund new social builds. The building of all new social homes would need to be entirely funded by the Executive. Since the ONS decision, the British Government have prevented its having that effect on the Executive's Budget by applying a derogation. The Treasury terms for that derogation require that the Executive must, in the meantime, expedite legislation that would reform the relationship between it and the associations so as to permit ONS to return registered housing associations to a private sector classification.

The derogation expires on 31 March 2021, and it is unlikely that there will be a further extension to that classification. To put that in context, if 2019-2020 had been negatively affected in that way, the £146 million of capital that my Department allocated to new social housing builds could not have been matched by similar sums of borrowing by housing associations. Instead of supporting a target of 1,850 new build starts, about half of that number of builds would have been affordable. At a time when the waiting list for social homes continues to increase, that is clearly an unacceptable situation. Since 2016, it has become clear that the ONS classification of registered housing associations to the public sector has made them ineligible to access financial transactions capital or FTC loan funding.

The access to FTC has supported housing tenures other than social rented tenures — the most significant of which is the co-ownership scheme. In the last two years, the

scheme has supported over 2,000 households into home ownership, and, from April 2015, the scheme has utilised a FTC loan to do that. However, from November 2018, my Department maintained the delivery of intermediate shared ownership houses at those levels by securing an additional £49 million of capital DEL grants, with approximately £15 million in 2018-19 and a further £34 million in 2019-2020. The alternative would have been a closure of the scheme for new applications.

Unless a private sector classification is returned to housing associations, the only options for 2020-21 and beyond are closure or still further pressure on capital DEL. Social and economic benefits are at the heart of the reclassification in this legislation. The economic benefits, the use of capital DEL to leverage inward commercial investment and the financial transactions capital that can once again be drawn down will take on additional relevance insofar as they will add to the economic recovery from COVID-19.

It may be helpful to spend a few minutes to go through the details of the scope of the Bill. ONS determined that housing associations should be classified to the public sector because it observed the level of control of housing associations, by the Executive through my Department, not to be consistent with a private sector classification.

That is why the sole focus of the draft Bill is to remove or amend those provisions in current housing legislation that provide for that control.

1.15 pm

As England, Scotland and Wales have also had the same reclassification decision made by ONS, there was regular liaison between officials here and those three other areas. That forum allowed the Department to learn from others' experience and to gain an insight into the legislative amendments that ONS considered to be acceptable for reversing its decision.

The issue of the house sales scheme was unique, as we are the only jurisdiction or local authority with a compulsory scheme for registered housing associations.

The draft Bill that this work has produced has eight substantive clauses and three technical clauses. There is also a short schedule. The explanatory and financial memorandum published alongside the Bill provide a detailed explanation of it, and I will briefly outline the Bill's main impacts.

First, the current consent process for a number of functions carried out by housing associations will be replaced by a notifications process. Secondly, the circumstances in which the housing regulator may launch an inquiry into the activities of an association are more clearly framed and based in failure or suspected failure to comply with legislation. Thirdly, the Bill removes the power of the Department to petition for the winding-up of an association, a power that has never been used. Creditor bodies could still do that.

Finally, the Bill proposes to end the statutory house sales scheme for housing associations, and it introduces a power to enable the Department to support a voluntary house sales scheme should the associations develop a substitute one.

The Bill will not decrease the regulatory authority exercised by the housing regulator and does not diminish

the relationship between the tenant and the association nor the tenant's ability to engage with the regulator.

The approach in the legislation has been based on the direction from the Executive as far back as September 2016 and does only that which is necessary to achieve the reversal of the ONS decision. That is why the Bill proposes changes to the current compulsory house sales scheme for registered housing associations, but not for the Housing Executive.

I will, in due course, consult on methods of entry to affordable home ownership, both on extending existing schemes and introducing new alternative options, particularly for social tenants who wish to become homeowners. That consultation will be brought forward in the coming months and will include consideration of how best to protect the social housing stock and the future of the Housing Executive's house sales scheme.

I am happy to deal with any points of principle from Members.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):

The Committee for Communities welcomes this Bill. Indeed, given the important issues that this Bill addresses, we anticipated that we would have already considered it, given that it was a key priority at the start of this Assembly.

In September, it will be four years since the Office for National Statistics took the decision to reclassify registered housing associations to the public sector and designate them as public, non-financial corporations. It is important to recognise that, on one level, that was a decision taken in order to align with technical accounting rules, but it has had a significant impact on the housing sector.

The key purpose of the Bill is, of course, to make the required changes to ensure that the ONS will reverse that decision and return housing associations to the private sector. As noted in the debate on the previous motion, the Committee was briefed by the Minister on 13 May. During that briefing, the Minister noted a number of reasons why accelerated passage was required, and those issues are also pertinent to this Second Stage debate.

Housing associations normally raise money through the private sector in order to match fund the housing grant from the Department. If the decision is not reversed, housing associations will not be able to do that and the number of social housing starts will significantly reduce by as much as 50%.

In addition, housing associations will lose eligibility to access financial transactions capital — a government loan scheme that is primarily used to support the co-ownership scheme.

Despite the derogation from the Treasury, housing associations have not been able to access that scheme. The Committee was advised that it costs the Department £3 million per month to maintain the co-ownership scheme. That is not sustainable, and, in these uncertain times, that money could be used to fund other priorities.

At the heart of the ONS decision lay the degree of control that the Department exercises over housing associations. The greater the control, the more likely it was that ONS would not reverse its decision. Of course, the Committee was concerned that the Department should still be able to exercise sufficient regulatory control over housing

associations, particularly given the large amount of public money that that sector receives. The Department advised the Committee that the ONS had looked at the current regulatory system, proposed changes to it and were content with what the Department was proposing, so the Committee was reassured that regulation will continue broadly in the same way as it does now.

A key issue for members was the decision to abolish the right-to-buy scheme in relation to housing association homes. That was covered in clause 7. Some members saw it as a popular scheme that gave people a foot on the property ladder. Others said that it contributed to the reduction in our social housing stock. Arguably, both of those positions are true, but the Committee was advised that, if that provision was not included, ONS would not reverse its September 2016 decision. It is also worth noting that between 20 and 60 housing association properties are sold annually, whereas between 200 and 400 Housing Executive properties are sold. That is important because the ending of the right-to-buy scheme will apply only to tenants in the housing association sector and not to tenants in Housing Executive accommodation. That runs the risk of there being inequality if it is not addressed soon, and the Minister has given her assurances that it will be. However, for the main purpose of the Bill, the Committee was told that that is not required.

I should also point out that, for those who are considering buying a housing association house, there is a two-year transitional period in which tenants can register an interest to purchase. It is not the case that contracts have to be exchanged within that two-year time frame. Registered housing associations will, however, be able to operate a voluntary right-to-buy scheme, and clause 8 will allow the Department to pay a grant in support of a voluntary housing scheme. The Committee welcomes that.

Housing is a multifaceted issue that, in normal circumstances, would be a key priority for the Committee. COVID-19 has temporarily put paid to that, but the Committee looks forward to engaging with the Department and stakeholders on housing over the rest of the Assembly mandate. That is something on which, the Minister has advised, she also wants to make progress. However, the Committee supports the Bill at its Second Stage.

Ms Ennis: I find the intervention by my colleague on the Committee for Communities a bit bizarre. He gave a long preamble about housing being an equality issue, yet he attempted to jeopardise the accelerated passage of the Bill. If that were to happen, approximately £20 million would be taken out of the social housing budget. Considering that he did not mention any of his concerns when we spoke about it in Committee, I find it a bit bizarre.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: I am sure that the Member will explain it in his contribution, so I will leave that to him.

I thank the Minister for her fast and decisive action in providing the utmost support for our housing providers and those who struggle to obtain a home, either through homeownership or social housing. The Bill is about maintaining the supply of new homes that is necessary to help struggling families and our most vulnerable to access housing and have the security and dignity of a home. If classified as public bodies, housing associations would lose the ability to borrow financial transactions capital,

as all borrowing would have to count as public sector borrowing. In real terms, that would reduce the number of social homes by approximately 50% each year and would dramatically reduce funding for the co-ownership scheme.

Every year, 60 housing association homes and 30 Housing Executive homes are sold, and that stock is never replaced. How many families are already struggling to obtain their own home while living in unfair conditions of overcrowding? How many young families are still being penalised for the housing crash over a decade ago? The Assembly must ensure the maximum delivery of social and affordable homes for our citizens in what will undoubtedly be a tough and uncertain period ahead.

Mr Durkan: In the previous debate, I acknowledged the importance of the Bill and the hugely significant role that it would play in enabling us to build more houses and provide more homes. We all know people who have spent years on the list waiting for a home: families who, without the security of somewhere that they can call their own, have run the gauntlet of the private rented sector and others living in overcrowded conditions with their extended families and friends. We are failing those people. Any measure that can and will help us to help them is to be supported.

In the previous debate, I also acknowledged that the Bill was far from perfect. I am not the only one with questions about it. Some Members will have received the same correspondence as I have from Housing Rights, which shares many of the concerns raised by Committee members. The primary concerns seem to focus on clause 7, which deals with the abolition of the mandatory right-to-buy scheme in housing associations — sorry, the move to make it voluntary. The right-to-buy scheme has been popular, and members touched on that in Committee. It has allowed people to get on to the housing market affordably, and most of us will know many people who have availed themselves of and benefited from the scheme. However, in my book, the right to buy is trumped every time by the right to a roof over your head. We cannot afford to continue to sell off social housing stock while need increases and we are not able to build anywhere near enough homes to meet that need.

Given that there has been extensive consultation, it is difficult to understand why the Minister has not taken the opportunity that the Bill presents to make the scheme voluntary for all social landlords. By excluding the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and retaining the mandatory right to buy for NIHE tenants, you create an inequality in access to social housing and ownership. It could very likely also have implications for the administration of the social housing allocation system. Might some people reject what, to all intents and purposes, is a reasonable offer of a housing association property while they wait for the offer of a Housing Executive home that they can ultimately own?

As things stand, about 10 times as many Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties as housing association properties are sold every year. In Committee, I sought and received an assurance from the Minister that she would address the Housing Executive situation in the near future. We need to hear more detail on that, and we need to hear it soon. Does the Minister intend or envisage an ultimate reclassification of the Housing Executive to take it out of public sector borrowing requirements and a remodelling that would allow it to borrow and build much-needed

homes and communities, as it does so well? An update on the social housing reform programme would be welcome from the Minister today.

I am conscious that I might be coming across a bit curmudgeonly. That is not my intention, believe me, but it is important that the weaknesses in any legislation are flagged up as it is debated in the House. Clause 8 appears to allow the Department to compensate housing associations that continue to operate a voluntary right-to-buy scheme. How will that work? What measures will exist to prevent associations picking what homes they want to sell solely on the basis of profitability, selling off better homes while happily retaining homes of a lower standard for social housing tenants?

Despite the fact that we will now not have a Committee Stage, I am and we are happy to work with any and every Member and the Minister to consider how the Bill may be strengthened. That should not detract from my support of the Bill's aim to reverse the ONS reclassification. We need to empower our housing providers to build more, and we need to use every legislative tool at our disposal to do so.

We support the work of housing associations and co-ownership.

1.30 pm

We have heard the cost, which is £3 million per month, of not doing this. However, for how many months have we been paying that £3 million? This legislation, like so much important legislation, has been delayed because we had no Assembly. In response to Ms Ennis, I say that I did ask officials about the financial cost of the delay and was given a rough estimate of £40 million thus far. As for social cost, one of the Minister's officials computed that 700 social homes had not been built as a direct consequence of the pyrrhic political stand-off between Sinn Féin and the DUP that left the people of the North without an Assembly. However, we have moved on, I hope, and now we must focus on making things right. The Minister and Chair outlined the Bill's benefits, and there are many. We and our constituents cannot afford for the Bill not to pass, and we support it.

Mr Allen: First, before I go into the Bill's detail, I place on record that I understand and fully appreciate the position taken by the Member across the way. Under normal circumstances, we would not like to see the Bill progress with accelerated passage. I understand where the Member is coming from, but I take a slightly different position in the current circumstances.

I welcome the Bill. It is good to see its introduction, nearly four years on from the original decision made by the ONS. We were promised it on numerous occasions throughout the previous mandate. Regrettably, we were not here for three years, when we should have been dealing with these topics and important measures.

We are all cognisant of the various and profound issues that the Minister, Committee Chair and my Committee colleague across the way highlighted, including the impact that the failure to achieve reversal of the reclassification will have on many of our constituents across Northern Ireland, the impact on financial transactions capital and the impact for the many tens of thousands of individuals and families on social housing waiting lists across Northern Ireland. We feel that the Bill and the majority of its substantive clauses are necessary, proportionate

and measured. We welcome the fact that we will still see regulatory oversight of housing associations. The majority of housing associations operate in a good manner. I have had very good dealings with housing associations when engaging with them on behalf of constituents. Thankfully, to date, I have not had a negative experience, and they have always been proactive and willing to engage to resolve any issues.

My party and I are on record about our position on the right-to-buy scheme. We recognise that the right to buy was not perfect. It was not a utopia. There were problems with that system, and no one is denying that, but it provided those who wished to get on the housing ladder with an opportunity to do so. However, we fully understand and appreciate the necessity, in the Bill, to abolish the right-to-buy scheme, and we reluctantly support that. In turn, we welcome the voluntary scheme. As my colleague across the way pointed out, some further detail would be good. I raised that point at the Committee with the Minister and officials, who said that they would come back with that information. It would be helpful to know how that scheme will be administered. What will the grants look like, and what form will they take? As the Member across the way pointed out, how will it be decided what housing stock will be sold etc?

We support the Bill, and I am happy to work with any Member who wants to strengthen it.

Ms Armstrong: The Housing (Amendment) Bill takes forward change to the way in which housing associations are designated. As other Members mentioned, it has been some time in coming, and I thank the Minister for bringing it forward. I appreciate that accelerated passage is not the way to go, and I have said that before, but, in this instance, it is. This will allow social housing to continue to receive funding and will enable co-ownership to continue to help people to buy their home.

One issue of note, today, which others mentioned, is clause 7: the statutory house sale scheme will be abolished. The right to buy may continue if the social housing association chooses to take forward a voluntary scheme. The Alliance Party recognises that many people have availed themselves of the system but also that the lack of replacement builds meant a 42.5% increase in social housing stress waiting lists from 2009 to 2019. The Housing Executive still will be able to sell off its homes. We need to align social housing and the Housing Executive right to buy, and I encourage the Minister to complete the review of the Housing Executive as soon as is practical.

I also want to highlight the fact that the 'New Decade, New Approach' document included an agreement for a housing outcome to be added to the Programme for Government. I appreciate that while we are going through the pandemic, work still needs to be done to ensure that housing is treated as a priority and will appear in the updated Programme for Government. As mentioned by others, I would like the Minister to work with social housing to ensure that any future voluntary scheme for a right to buy includes a requirement to deliver inclusive and cohesive communities by ensuring that mixed tenure is maintained.

I absolutely welcome what is coming with the Bill, because it means that our construction industry can see that the market is there, that there is work for them to do and that we will be able to provide the funding for them. It is a

difficult one to take forward as an urgent case, but it makes sense. We need to deal with the ONS reclassification and we need to do it as quickly as possible. I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill forward.

Mr Buckley: I support the legislation to reverse the ONS decision to reclassify registered housing associations to the public sector and designate them as public non-financial corporations. In doing so, I support the Bill's purpose as there is clearly a need for us to be able to invest for the future in our social housing stock. We know about the housing stress that exists at present.

However, given the way that the Bill has been progressed by accelerated passage, I support it with considerable regret that we have had to go down that avenue. I have some considerable agreement with my colleague the Member for Foyle Mr Durkan in relation to the lack of scrutiny that we have been able to have in relation to this crucial piece of legislation. We have already heard that it is needed and we know that it has done the rounds for many years now in this place. People like me, who are new to the Committee, have not had the ability to scrutinise that housing sector in the way in which, I believe, we should.

It has to be said that we cannot continue to scrutinise important pieces of legislation via telephone conferences. I understand that that is happening at the moment because of COVID-19, but this is too important. Our eyes must be over the legislation in its entirety. We had a briefing from the Minister on 13 May, which we appreciated. It was an opportunity for Members to put on record their concerns and, despite what Ms Ennis said, there was concern from Committee members as to the purpose and intention of the different elements and clauses of the Bill. The point is that for it to go forward as the Minister has recommended, the reason why we can support accelerated passage is because of the points that she mentioned, namely that £3 million a month is being wasted while the decision has not been overturned, and because of the potential threat of derogation being withheld.

I am on record in the Committee as saying that one particular clause in the Bill causes me considerable regret. It is in relation to the proposed abolition of the right-to-buy scheme. For many, it was a contentious scheme but I saw it as a very popular policy, which enjoyed widespread support from those who could only once have dreamed of getting their foot on the property ladder. The right-to-buy policy enabled them not only to get on the housing ladder, but have an asset that they could leave to future generations of their family. It is something that many of them had worked towards all their lives. It also provided them with the financial security of home ownership, and we all know the importance of the ability to own an asset such as a home that can, potentially, be used to move people away from the care of the state towards private asset ownership.

It is also important to bear witness to the fact that it has been noted that those who own an asset such as a home have a sense of ownership and care and attention. Roots were laid in communities across Northern Ireland because of the policy that allowed individuals to own their homes.

I have a concern about clause 8. Clause 8 is included to allow the Department to pay grants to support voluntary schemes, but very little detail is provided in the Bill and the explanatory note, or has been given to the Committee,

on what sort of schemes will be going forward. I would like clarity on that from the Department and the Minister, because if we are moving towards a situation in which the right-to-buy scheme is to be abolished under the Bill, because the ONS classifies that as overarching control, it is that decision that will probably be key to moving it towards reversing its decision. However, the Committee has had no viewing of what potential schemes or otherwise people might be able to avail themselves of in the future. While I recognise that the right to buy will not be abolished for, I think, two years, it gives people some security to get on the scheme. It is future generations and their right and ability to own their own homes that I think about. I would appreciate it if the Minister could give further clarity on clause 8 and its meaning.

Obviously, as this applies to the registered housing associations, there will be further discussion in the House and at Committee in relation to the Housing Executive. I hope that the House will not be going towards accelerated passage again and not have the opportunity to examine carefully every facet of proposed legislation to ensure that we give people the ability to eventually own their home through these schemes which have been so popular.

Ms Sheerin: I support the Bill. As a rural representative in an area in which young people, in particular, struggle to get their feet on the property ladder, I support the Bill's intention to avoid the halving of the social housing programme. We have had over 10 years of austerity. Prices keep rising; wages do not. More and more people are finding that their grown-up children are still living with them as they approach their thirties and, indeed, in their thirties. I know, because I am one of them.

In rural areas, a lack of building in small towns and villages means that most people have only two options: move to where there is affordable housing or wait it out. Housing lists in small rural villages are not always a true depiction or reflection of reality, because when people are applying for housing and told that there is none available in their locality, they pick somewhere five, six or 10 miles down the road.

If you are not lucky enough to inherit a site, have a site for which you can get planning permission or to have the thousands that are required to build a home, you have to stick it out. That is unfair. We have discussed the lack of housing. The reclassification would leave the Executive funding the entire new build programme, which potentially reduces the number of new builds from over 1,800 to 900. In rural areas, we need more building, not less. For that reason, I support the Bill.

Mr McGrath: I begin by acknowledging the remarks already made regarding the death of George Floyd. In this place, we know the importance of civil rights and the implementation of them. The scenes from America are harrowing and a throwback to a time that we all hoped we had moved from.

The core of the Bill is the ability to deliver new social homes, of which there is already a distinct shortage in our community. How many of us are regularly contacted by people asking if there are social houses available, how they can get their name down for a development or when a new development in the area will commence? We also all know of the sterling work that is being undertaken on the streets of our towns and cities to manage homelessness, and we know of the many hundreds, if not thousands,

more who sofa surf because of the lack of a home. The need for new homes is present in our community, and we must deliver on that need and remove barriers that are preventing the building of new homes. The Bill aims to address that.

The Bill has some imperfections, and the nature of it being accelerated concerns us. The Bill is not needed until 31 March next year. More time to have better scrutinised it would have been beneficial, if only to draw on the expertise amongst the housing sector that could have helped inform us and helped us make sure that the Bill was watertight and as good as it could be.

1.45 pm

The reclassification proposed in the Bill allows registered housing associations to borrow money. It is something that they have always done in the past, and the Bill aims to reverse a bad decision that was taken a few years ago that was more to do with what was happening elsewhere rather than here. That decision could have massive ramifications. For example, in 2019-2020, £146 million was borrowed by housing associations, and, with the change to rules implemented going forward, that would have resulted in a massive real terms hit to the budgets of housing associations. More importantly, it would have resulted in them not being able to build new homes and reach the target that the Executive have set for new build.

Much of the previous money borrowed was FTC, and we know what the perception is of that money being handed back. Last year, £150 million was handed back. Imagine if we could have directed that to our housing sector. Much of that which was borrowed funded co-ownership, which in the past two years has delivered 2,145 houses. What would our future be if we cannot deliver that level of housing? Over 2,000 families would be stuck in older housing, maybe in unfit properties and maybe not where they want to be.

Surely our measure as a society is our ability to deliver on housing. Without change, which the Bill proposes, we will be unable to get the much-needed finance into our housing system, and this will mean that we will be miss our target of 1,850 new-build properties a year. In fact, the SDLP wants to see a stronger and higher target, and we also want to see the inclusion of the housing indicator in the Programme for Government, so we have not finished on that ask yet either. Such an indicator would be a clear indication from the Executive that they are serious about housing provision, and that that will be underpinned by the need for the all-essential cash.

There is real housing stress in our communities, and, as I have said, there is hardly one of us in his Chamber who is not contacted daily about housing. We are contacted about the need for a house, the need for an upgrade to a house or maybe the wish to move out of a particular area because it is bad for people's health, maybe bad for their mental health. We hear also, through processes like Bengoa, that the type of upbringing that children have can dictate their future health needs. One core element of how children are brought up is the roof over their head and the fact that it is a good, modern, high-quality home in a nice community that is well laid out and looked after. That will certainly give children a much better start in their life.

The quality of the existing stock is diminishing, too. Many of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive houses are

getting old, and they are not able to build new homes. This means that the cost of repairs is increasing, and that is zapping up the budget of the Housing Executive. Also, many of the developments that the Housing Executive has reflect the old North, the Northern Ireland of the past, and are in segregated areas that do not look to the future that we want to see in the North. Only new developments away from contentious areas, away from flashpoints and peace walls, can embrace the new Ireland that we would like to seek. These new communities can live side by side with emerging communities, too. Again, all of that is underpinned by the capacity and ability of housing associations to be able to build new houses, new developments and new communities and create that future. The Housing (Amendment) Bill may not sound glamorous, but this is a Bill that unleashes the potential of the North, and, therefore, we support it.

Ms Anderson: Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an Bhille seo. I want to speak in favour of the Bill, but, as I stand here this afternoon, I also want to send my deepest sympathy to the family and friends of George Floyd. I say to those who are on the streets protesting that black lives matter.

Across the island of Ireland, we are in the midst of a housing crisis, but, in the North of Ireland, if we reflect back to 2002, we will see that over 13,000 people were in housing stress. By 2019, that had skyrocketed to over 26,000 people.

Without this Bill, the reclassification of registered housing associations by the British Government would deepen the housing crisis and halve the annual amount of council housing that is built in the North. My constituents — our constituents — in Derry would absolutely understand the need for accelerated passage. No one likes accelerated passage. We all like the opportunity to scrutinise, and to scrutinise properly, but they would understand it, because people do not want there to be the opportunity for the co-ownership scheme to close. Some £21 million, we are hearing, would have to come out of the social housing development programme otherwise. In the context of COVID-19, that is a lot of money. It is money that is needed for the social housing development programme in places such as Derry and north Belfast.

Furthermore, it is appropriate to say, given the objections that have been raised, that previous SDLP Ministers — in fact, former SDLP Social Development Ministers — used the accelerated passage mechanism, and did so was when there was no COVID-19. I therefore acknowledge the clause —.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. In this debate, I referred to the need to use every legislative tool at our disposal to help our constituents, so many of whom — you gave a figure, Ms Anderson, of 26,000 — are in housing need. Of course we must, and the accelerated passage procedure is a legislative tool. Yes, it is one that other Ministers, from every party, will have used at different stages in the lifetime of the Assembly. Will the Member not concur with me, however, that it is vital that we get legislation right? What we are talking about here is not a huge delay but merely time to afford Committee members and MLAs who are not on the Committee an opportunity to scrutinise the Bill fully and hear evidence from the sector, experts in the field and even the Housing Executive on the legislation's implications for the wider housing sector.

Ms Anderson: I hope that this is not a dialogue of the deaf, because I did say that, as MLAs, we do want to scrutinise. We all want to be involved in proper scrutiny and to make sure that legislation goes through in a way that affords us the opportunity to engage with people, but no one wants to see an opportunity for co-ownership to be lost or for the scheme to close, and we do not want to see up to £21 million come out of the social housing development programme if the Bill does not pass.

I acknowledge clause 7, which will abolish the compulsory right-to-buy scheme for registered housing associations. That policy was introduced by Margaret Thatcher and has helped to grind down the supply of social housing in the North. Although, as has been said, the scheme is good and has given people the chance to buy their social home at a discount, it, in practice, has facilitated private companies to siphon off public access in order to make a profit. Homeownership is without doubt a good thing, but I have been dealing with constituents, as, I am sure, other MLAs have, and I have found that many people who wanted to own their own home but who could not afford to do so were enticed by the private sector with conditional loans, which enabled them to live in their house until they died. Afterwards, the house was transferred to the private sector. That is housing stock that has never really been replaced.

The policy was never really about homeownership on its own. It was an attempt to turn some aspects of social housing into what I would describe as something like the wild west of unbridled capitalism, where greed trumps need.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No. You have had enough time.

Minister, I am glad that the Bill will put an end to two policies that threaten the provision of social housing. I am aware, and I am sure that you will agree, that much more needs to be done. That is something of which, crucially, all MLAs are conscious. We need to increase our social housing stock, because access to adequate housing is a human right. It is a human right that everyone in the Chamber would support and concur with.

In 2019, in my Derry constituency, there were 4,510 people on the housing waiting list. In the same year, only 1,231 people were housed. Derry has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the North, and one of the lowest rates of approval for new plans to build additional social housing. In fact, due to nearly a decade of Tory austerity and its impact in slashing things such as the budget for NI Water, even when social housing is planned in Derry, building is stalled. I am sure that it is not just in Derry, but it is certainly the case in my constituency because there is simply not the sewerage capacity to build the new houses.

Minister, I believe that the Bill is a good step towards ensuring the maximum delivery of social and affordable housing for our citizens. However, it is clear that we also need to address the housing shortage, particularly in areas such as Derry and north Belfast that have suffered from persistent and chronic housing inequality. Minister, you know that further decisive interventions, like that before us today, will be required to resolve this crisis. In that vein, I ask that, in addition to this legislation, you consider reintroducing the policy of ring-fencing new-build allocations with robust monitoring to ensure that social housing is delivered as a priority in areas that are most in need such as Derry and north Belfast. On that, I want to

mention one of my colleagues who cannot be here, Carál Ní Chuilín, who has raised issues about north Belfast on a number of occasions.

The policy should never have been removed. However, unfortunately and shamefully, in my opinion, it was removed by not one but two SDLP Ministers. First, Margaret Ritchie started it and Alex Atwood, shamefully, ended it. Hence, I asked you, Minister, to consider reinstating the ring-fencing policy with a robust monitoring mechanism to ensure that further social housing is built where it is most needed.

Ms McLaughlin: I, too, add my condolences to the family of George Floyd. The civil rights movement in Derry started because of a housing issue: an inequality. What we are speaking about now is an inequality. Housing is a right, and we should support it. I just wanted to say that before I look at the Bill.

This may look like a technical Bill, but it is a very important one. It unlocks opportunities for economic growth as we emerge from the COVID-19 lockdown. The suspension of the Assembly for three years caused serious and specific difficulties for the social housing sector in Northern Ireland. The lack of an Assembly meant that we were unable to process the legal changes that have been undertaken in Great Britain. In turn, this has restricted the ability of our housing associations to borrow.

We have a housing crisis in Northern Ireland. We have very long waiting lists for social housing. Around 38,000 households are on the waiting list, with about 26,000 of our households in housing stress and 12,000 recognised as homeless. Yet, we are building fewer than 1,000 new social homes per year. At the current rate of progress, it will take several decades to clear the social housing waiting list. That is unacceptable.

According to the House of Commons's library, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK in which the private rental housing sector is larger than the social housing sector.

That is a serious problem, because parts of the private rental sector are of very poor quality, while also being more expensive than social housing.

2.00 pm

We need housing associations to build large numbers of housing units to meet the massive need for new homes. That will create substantial numbers of desperately needed jobs. It should also come with an accredited training scheme, helping to strengthen our skills base.

My party's hope is that the Bill will do more than enable housing associations to build additional homes, create jobs and training places. We hope it will also open up greater use of financial transaction capital. It is obscene that Northern Ireland underspent its allocation of financial transaction capital by £150 million last year. That was a golden opportunity to spend more money here.

We want our housing associations to be dynamic organisations, borrowing to invest, building social and affordable homes that are clean and efficient, creating places for people to live, strengthening our communities and providing jobs.

My party also wants housing associations to be full and committed participants in the green new deal, cutting

carbon emissions and creating a cleaner economy. Those opportunities stand before us today. Had we been here sooner in the Assembly, we would have created more homes earlier, easing our chronic housing problem. The Bill would not have had to go through an accelerated process, because we would have already dealt with it. We are in this housing crisis because we were not here in the House. It is because the DUP and Sinn Féin walked out the door. That is why we are here. However, we agree now that we are in the right place, and we will move on. We support the Bill.

Miss Woods: Whilst I appreciate the need for the reclassification, and what this means for the future of social housing in Northern Ireland within our current system, we need to get back on target and provide stimulus for at least 2000 new social homes per year. I hope that this Bill does everything that it says on the tin, and that it forms a part of what we need to do to get out of the housing crisis that we have been in for years.

I would like to raise a few concerns and bring them to the attention of the Minister, if she would not mind addressing them later.

There is an issue with the potential to create inequality in access to social housing and home ownership, as has been mentioned by some in the Chamber. Many tenants in social homes aspire to home ownership, and the right to buy is often their only hope of fulfilling that aspiration. However, administering the social housing allocation system is difficult. Could this change allow a route to home ownership for some tenants, and not for others, depending on the landlord? Will it contribute to some tenants consciously turning down a reasonable offer of accommodation, when there is no possibility of future home ownership? If that proves to be the case, it will not reduce housing stress or the housing list.

The right-to-buy scheme has been much discussed and debated previously in the Chamber. It has been abolished in every other part of the UK, and rightly so. Because of it, we have seen the privatisation of social housing. Over 100,000 social homes were lost to private ownership, and they have not been replaced. As of March 2019, more than 123,000 homes have been removed from the social housing stock since 1979. Social housing does not exist to provide private homes.

There is a reference to the right to buy scheme in clause 7 of the Bill. I ask the Minister whether she is minded to bring additional legislation to the House in order to extend the cessation, or voluntary nature of it, to NIHE properties, bearing in mind that there is no voluntary scheme in Scotland or Wales. If so —.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way, where a previous Member would not. Following Ms Anderson's scathing critique of the right-to-buy scheme, does the Member concur with me that it is frankly bizarre that she was entirely dismissive of remarks raised by me and others, that the scheme should be extended, or the — I have lost it now — should be extended to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as well, who sell 10 times more homes per year than housing associations?

Miss Woods: I think that the Member has made his point. We will leave it at that.

When does the Minister envisage this will be? The matter was consulted on in June 2018. Does she think there is need for another public consultation?

Clause 8 allows a housing association offering a voluntary scheme to receive compensation from the Department in the form of a grant. As Mr Allen has asked, will the Minister outline how this will work and what it will look like?

Does the Minister consider that that could incentivise housing associations to continue to operate a right-to-buy scheme by a different route, which would increase the pressure on social housing? Where is the oversight? Does she agree that that may reduce the number of homes that are available to meet housing demand for people who need it? It is quite unclear as to why that condition is necessary or appropriate in the context of the well-documented pressures on social housing supply. Perhaps, the Minister will address that. Is that a requirement from ONS?

Furthermore, has any consideration been given to the removal of clause 8? Would the conditions that are required for the reclassification of housing associations be met now? If so, could it be considered for future legislation alongside repeal of the statutory house sales scheme with regard to Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties?

Clauses 1 and 2 change the relationship with regard to regulation between the Department and housing associations. Whilst I understand that that is a required part of the reclassification requirements with the ONS, I would like to get assurances that that reclassification would not result in the deregulation or regression of departmental oversight. Also, does the Minister support calls for an independent housing regulator to be set up here, similar to that which exists in the rest of the UK? Whilst I understand that the establishment of one is not within the scope of the Bill, safeguards are needed not only for the tenant but for the public interest in housing associations and to ensure that there is a regulator that is separate from public policy responsibilities and located outside government. That would follow best practice in the field, as has been established in Scotland. I hope that the Minister considers that seriously and implements it at a later date.

Additionally, a new housing strategy has been discussed and was part of the Executive's commitments in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Suitable homes need to be provided for people who need them, as well as bringing the existing stock up to standard through deep retrofitting, tackling fuel poverty, providing green energy sources, and looking at and acting on the conditions of properties. I am sure that many Members have experienced living in homes that are not up to standard or have been contacted about constituents who have to live with, say, serious damp problems, which can cause health issues for them and their young families, only to be told that they need to keep their windows open longer or put on a dehumidifier, when, without serious work, the conditions of the house will never be good enough. That has to be done with the underlying principle of keeping people in their homes. I would be interested to hear of any progress in the development of a new housing strategy and whether any of the issues that I have raised will be addressed in it, perhaps as part of a rolling programme of legislation.

The housing waiting list is at an unacceptable level. As of March 2019, nearly 38,000 households were on it. The people who need to be housed are not being housed.

Homelessness figures are rising. It is not just about the people who sleep on the streets, for whom it has taken a global pandemic for people to act, but for people who are in temporary accommodation and who do not have secure permanent housing.

The social housing stock has been reduced significantly. In the 1970s, there were 155,000 Housing Executive homes. In 2016, there were around 88,000, plus the 40,000 housing association houses. In 2019, just over 85,000 homes were managed by NIHE, with much of that stock being in need of significant maintenance or, indeed, replacement. That is not to say that that reduction is down solely to the right to buy, but that has been a major part of it. Therefore, further opportunity exists here. As we look to the governance of housing associations and the changes that are proposed, we can, again, look at the governance of the Housing Executive and the possibility of building new homes.

Mr Carroll: The Bill seeks to reverse the 2016 decision of the ONS to loosen controls, deregulate and devolve right-to-buy powers to individual housing associations, as others have said. The proposals that are contained in the Bill follow a similar pattern to those of other jurisdictions in Britain, which all faced the same reclassification issue and have already returned housing associations to the private sector. People Before Profit opposes the main thrust of the Bill because it seeks to privatise and deregulate housing associations while, at the same time, maintaining and possibly increasing the public funding that they receive.

Clauses 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 all restrict the Department's powers. For example, clauses 1 and 6 change the Department's power to give consent for the disposal of land or merging of housing associations to a requirement for a housing association just to:

"notify the Department of the action."

That could bring about an increase in the ability of housing associations to dispose of more land while merely informing the Department along the way. That means, of course, that there would be even less accountability and oversight.

Land equals wealth, so we need to have a system in place in which the sale or transfer of land is tightly monitored, scrutinised and focused on. We know the power and wealth that developers have; we cannot see a situation in which that increases. Aspects of the Bill could lead to that. It is worth remembering that, not too long ago, we witnessed and discussed the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) transfer and the scandal associated with it: the £1.2 billion transfer of property — the biggest public transfer in the history of the state.

When we talk about the transfer of land, we need maximum accountability: the Bill proposes to do the exact opposite. The proposers of the Bill justify it — some Members have already justified it — on the basis that housing associations, when they are private bodies, can borrow funds that do not count towards overall public borrowing. That means, in theory, that the social housing grant given to housing associations to build new homes should be leveraged to build more houses than if the Northern Ireland Housing Executive alone was left to build houses.

The reality is very different. Since 1995-96, the Housing Executive has been banned from borrowing and building homes. In that year, the Housing Executive built 1,360

homes; the housing associations built only 1,040. On only two occasions since, in 2001 and 2012-13, has the housing-association sector built more than the 1996 NIHE benchmark.

The memorandum attached to the Housing (Amendment) Bill claims that, in 2019-2020, the housing association sector has a target of 1,850 new home starts. That target is simply not credible, as the new start level actually achieved in the previous year was just 980. The sector has never achieved such a level of new starts, the highest being 1,440 in 2011-12. The memorandum also states that the Department has allocated the housing association sector £146 million for new homes in 2019-2020. However, just imagine what the Housing Executive could do with £146 million of extra funding, especially if it were actually allowed to build houses.

The policy of funding housing associations while not funding the NIHE to build new public housing has been a failure over the past 25 years. It needs to stop. We should see the Housing Executive as the main provider of housing here and resist all attempts to run it down, privatise it, or reduce its funding.

We reject the reprivatisation of housing associations. Therefore I cannot support the Bill as it stands. Housing associations should remain public bodies and, ultimately, be integrated into the Housing Executive, becoming subject to full, comprehensive public accountability for the hundreds of millions of public money that they get every year. If housing associations want to return to the private sector, surely they should not be receiving such vast amounts of public funding.

I have mentioned the fundamental problems with the Bill, and, for those reasons, I cannot support it. If the Housing (Amendment) Bill does progress, and it is likely to, through its Second Stage, we will explore all options to amend it and raise concerns about it. As I say, we wish to see social housing provision balanced more fully towards public spending and to the Housing Executive playing a key role in that. We will challenge the idea that the market knows best and that the market should provide housing generally.

It is worth mentioning that, as the Member from Foyle said, housing association rents are, on the whole, cheaper than the Housing Executive's. The Housing Executive is more accountable. Whilst myself, and other Members, I am sure, have regular contact with the Housing Executive through raising concerns and challenging it, it is a better provider of public housing in general.

It is worth mentioning that, in 2017, the Housing Executive had 1,000 empty properties. Surely, more could be done to help people on the property waiting list by fixing up those properties and allocating them to those who need them.

In conclusion, we have heard comments about a new normal in regard to coronavirus, but I do not think that the provisions of the Bill reflect that or reflect the growing appetite of people to see stronger public housing and a stronger role for the Housing Executive in that. So, for those reasons, I will be opposing the Bill's Second Stage.

2.15 pm

Ms Hargey: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. On the face of it, I know, the Bill looks very technical, but at the heart of it is access to homes for

those in our communities who need it most. It is only with the reclassification that we are able to deliver more social and affordable homes to our people in the coming years. All Members, I hope, will accept that we urgently need to enhance what we deliver, particularly in the context of the New Decade, New Approach commitments. The legislation, if passed, will facilitate the reversal of the classification of housing associations and see them once again classified to the private sector, ensuring that they can continue to be our partners in developing social homes for people. Associations will continue to have discretion over their borrowing. The Executive will not be constrained by having to provide cover for that borrowing, and much-needed Executive funds will not be required to support co-ownership.

I will just comment on some of the issues that were raised in the debate. I feel like I keep getting up in the Chamber and saying that accelerated passage is not the way that I want to do business, yet nearly everything I have brought has gone through by accelerated passage. It is just because of the nature of the issues that I have been dealing with that there has been the urgency with which I had to bring things forward, and that is particularly the case because of the pandemic, which started probably fewer than six weeks after I took up the post of Minister for Communities. I make no apologies for bringing it this time, because there is a financial consequence that means that there would be a consequence for the number of social houses that could be built and a consequence for co-ownership houses. I know that some Members touched on the fact that there was a delay on that in 2016, so why try to delay it until 2020-21? Why try to delay it for up to another year when we can move on it now and make those changes to ensure that that £21 million, which would otherwise be diverted, goes back into the social housing development programme?

I know that there has been a lot of talk about the right to buy —

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hargey: No, you are OK. You have had your say.

I know that there has been a lot of talk about ending the right to buy, and there have been concerns about that. The clause abolishing it is in ours as it is a compulsory scheme based in legislation. In short, it evidences the sort of controls that ONS based its decision on. There is a key difference here from what happens in the other three jurisdictions in that our scheme is set out in law, which is not the case elsewhere. There are particular reasons for the scheme here and what ONS was uniquely saying about the right-to-buy scheme here at this time.

That said, I want to bring forward — I said this in my opening speech — as soon as possible and in the coming period considerations looking at the right to buy for Housing Executive properties as well. As someone who grew up in a Housing Executive property and still lives in a working-class estate in the Market area in south Belfast, I see the impact of that right to buy, where over 50% of the housing in that community has been sold off. Ultimately, when those houses get sold, it seems like a good idea at the time for people to have ownership, but, when they are sold on, that creates a waiting list in that community and people are living in hostels for five or six years and cannot get homes. We need a wider plan. The reclassification will not

fix everything, and I said that it was my intention to bring forward a wider plan that looks at housing going forward.

I have been in post since January, folks. We have been hit with the biggest pandemic that we have seen in our lifetime, so this will take a bit longer for those reasons. I am committed to bringing that forward as quickly as possible, looking not only at issues like affordable housing for people who want it and increasing the availability of social housing to ensure that those who need it most get access to it and other things like cooperative development housing, which would also use private-sector entity for borrowing — that is an important point — just like social enterprise.

I know that some touched on rights in housing, and I agree that it should be a priority in the Programme for Government. Those discussions are still ongoing, and, again, the COVID pandemic means that we are getting back into everyday business and to where we were in January. However, I will obviously make strong representations at the Executive, because I clearly see housing rights as human rights and human rights as housing rights. I am very clear on that. Obviously, the role of housing in building sustainable communities is something that I really value as well in terms of building the vibrancy of communities but at the same time ensuring that we have a housing system that provides for those who need it most and makes sure that there are protections for those who need them most as well.

There was some talk around clause 8 and the grant payments. Obviously, that is only for housing associations in respect of discount to a tenant in a social home. The terms and conditions for it are still being developed; they are not there yet. I will work with housing associations and others, because, even in the devising of this, we have been working with housing associations, the housing policy forum and others, and I will continue to do that. I know that Members have raised these issues specifically, and our officials will keep an eye on who raised them and will ensure that we update Members, as well as the Committee, as we go along.

In terms of regulation, these are technical changes. I know that they change things slightly, but some of the issues were around oversight and regulations that the Department has never had to invoke on housing associations up to this point. The key part is that the regulator will continue to have powers to make an intervention, and that engagement will be critical in the time ahead.

Members raised homelessness and said that this was only being done in the midst of a pandemic. I acted on street-based homelessness within six weeks of coming into office to ensure that people were not out on the street and that there was temporary accommodation for them. I want to build on that in the time ahead. That said, street-based homelessness does not reflect the even bigger homelessness issue of those who sofa-surf, are in overcrowded accommodation or have been in hostels for far too long, particularly in areas of highest and greatest need. North Belfast and Derry were mentioned; there are other areas as well. The issue of urban and rural is something that I am seriously considering, because the housing development programme has to be primarily targeted at those areas of greatest need as well. They have to see delivery. Someone waiting eight, nine and 10 years for a home is basically unacceptable, and we need to put interventions in place to ensure that that does not happen.

There has been a lot of talk about housing being a critical issue. It is a human rights issue, and I know that some have talked about civil rights. Obviously, we see on our screens the impact of America — the issue of National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) land and regeneration. As a Minister, I am from a working-class community, as I said. I grew up in a Housing Executive estate, and I am proud of my class identity and the community that I have come from. I am a community activist, and I come from parents who were civil rights activists. They helped, as early as the late '50s, going into the '60s, in the initial civil rights campaigns. That was around the housing in west Belfast at that time and the surveys that were carried out. I do that now in the community that I live in. We have taken on NAMA developers. I have gone to court to challenge NAMA developers. I have protested on the streets about NAMA development and the impact that it has. I have been an activist on these issues as well, and, of course, I am attuned to all to them. Land — public land, particularly — has to be used for the greater public use and should not be sold off just for private development. I am in tune with all of the issues, and I have said before that I am keen to engage with any Member who has recommendations or suggestions, not just on this — I hope that people can understand the reasons why I have to bring this legislation — but on the wider housing development programme. We have to get it right. We have to set a direction of travel to ensure that we deal with the issues that have been raised around underinvestment, restructuring, the revitalisation of the Housing Executive, looking at the mixture of housing and tenures and ensuring that those who are in critical need have a roof over their head.

I appreciate all the questions, points of clarity and points of view that Members have raised. My officials are taking a report, and, where we need to, we will write separately to Members who raised specific issues that, maybe, I have not particularly answered in the summing up. I remind Members that the key elements of the Bill are the introduction of a notification process, replacing the current consent process; the more specific framing of the circumstances in which an inquiry may be launched; and the ending of the statutory house sales scheme for housing associations. My purpose in bringing forward the legislation is to ensure that housing associations can be returned to private sector classification and, with that, provide protection for social housing development and affordable housing programmes.

I thank Members for their engagement and support until now, and I thank the Committee for its deliberations. I commend the Bill to the Assembly for its approval.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will put the Question again, now that Mr Carroll is on the record.

Question put a second time and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill [NIA 6/17-22] be agreed.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, the next two motions are to approve statutory rules relating to child support. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and then I will call on the Minister to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved. — [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Thank you, Minister. The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on both motions.

Ms Hargey: The regulations have enabled my Department to amend the child maintenance legislation to deliver the child maintenance compliance and arrears strategy. I will begin by setting out the background to that strategy, and then I shall detail the regulations.

In November 2017, my Department was included in a consultation by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on the proposed child maintenance compliance and arrears strategy, which also included England, Scotland and Wales. The approach taken has been to ensure that people are treated equally across those areas. The objectives of the strategy were to continue to prioritise resources to benefit the children of today; to continue to encourage parents to collaborate over their child maintenance arrangements where they can and where that is in the best interests of their children; to continue to minimise the child maintenance arrears being incurred; to further improve compliance through changes to child maintenance calculations; to strengthen collection powers across the child maintenance schemes; and to address the historic arrears that have built up under the former child maintenance legacy schemes and avoid government funding of high-cost attempts to recover historic arrears, which would, in fact result in no additional money going to children.

2.30 pm

Following the conclusion of the consultation and an analysis of the responses received, work began on taking forward the required legislative changes to successfully implement the compliance and arrears strategy. There are two packages of regulations, which I will outline separately.

The first package is the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations, and these introduce a number of changes to child maintenance legislation. Changes include improving the way in which child maintenance liabilities are calculated, increasing the range of collection and enforcement powers to help collect more money for children and addressing historic arrears that built up under the 1993 and 2003 child support legacy schemes. These changes will also help to prevent non-resident parents with complex financial arrangements from artificially lowering their child maintenance liability.

The regulations also close existing loopholes by introducing new provisions for orders. The orders enable regular or lump sum deductions to be made from joint, sole trader and unlimited partnership accounts. Powers are introduced to allow the arrears that occurred under the 1993 and 2003 legacy schemes to be written off in certain circumstances. These powers allow my Department to give certainty over its approach to the arrears.

On the child maintenance calculation and amendments, the regulations introduce a power for child maintenance service to determine a notional income from assets held by a non-resident parent. This helps to ensure that child maintenance calculations result in non-resident parents paying an amount that more accurately reflects their means. The notional income shall be calculated at 8% of a confirmed asset's total value where the asset value exceeds £31,250. You may wish to note that protections have been included to ensure that the use of these powers is proportionate. That would include certain circumstances, such as when the asset is used for business purposes or is the primary home of the parent or a child.

The regulations extend existing powers to apply regular and lump sum deduction orders to joint and unlimited partnership bank accounts and use lump sum deduction orders on sole traders' accounts. Again, my Department has ensured that the adequate safeguards are in place to protect the interests of other account holders.

With regard to historic arrears from 1993 to 2003, the regulations extend my Department's write-off powers to enable the arrears of up to £57.9 million that had built up under the 1993 to 2003 legacy schemes to be addressed and set out the circumstances under which these powers can be exercised. Members may wish to note that the arrears relate to legacy child maintenance scheme cases that could be more than 20 years old and where the children are now adults. It is also likely that the arrears balance was inaccurate due to the penalty assessments and inaccurate or out-of-date calculations at that time. A high proportion of the arrears are now deemed to be uncollectible, and attempting to collect the arrears is now deemed not to be cost-effective.

It should also be noted that it was estimated that more than 50% of the arrears were due to the Department and, therefore, would not benefit families. Where the arrears value is £65, the regulations enable the arrears to be written off without notice to either parent. This is in line with the current threshold used in my Department for debts owed to government.

If a case has debts subject to Scottish insolvency, the regulations will enable the debt to be written off when that expires. A parent with care will be able to make representation to my Department if they would like an

attempt to collect the arrears where the case started on or before 1 November 2008 and the arrears are more than £1,000; the case started after 1 November 2008 and the arrears are more than £500; or the arrears occurred under the 1993 to 2003 legacy schemes case, which was transferred to the 2012 child maintenance system, and the debt is more than £500. Where no representations are received or collection of the arrears is not possible, my Department may exercise the power to write off the debt.

The regulations enable legacy child maintenance arrears to be written off without seeking representations from parents with care where there has not been a payment in the past three months; the case started on or before November 2008 and the arrears are less than or equal to £1,000; the case started after 1 November and the arrears are less than or equal to £500; or the arrears occurred under the 1993 to 2003 schemes that have transferred to the child maintenance system and the debt arrears are less than or equal to £500.

Those amounts were selected as it was deemed not to be cost-effective to attempt the collection of individual arrears of less than £500 or of less than £1,000 where the case is more than 10 years old. It would, on average, cost between £500 and £1,000 to investigate such cases and take further action. Given the background and historical aspect of the legacy cases, it was deemed to be highly unlikely that the arrears would ever be recovered. To date, my Department has addressed almost 10,000 cases with an arrears value of £27 million through the process that I have outlined.

The second package of regulations are the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations. The purpose of these regulations is to introduce changes to legislation, introducing remaining compliance powers: namely broadening the range of benefits from which arrears of child maintenance can be deducted; expanding the list of persons from whom relevant information can be requested by my Department; write-off powers to extinguish debt where a protected trust deed has been granted to a parent and has expired; and making a minor and technical change to the child maintenance calculation and fees regulations.

These regulations increase the amount of maintenance that can be deducted from benefits towards arrears to £8.40, that is £7 and a £1.40 collection fee. That is 20% of the overall amount. That now aligns with the amount that my Department can already deduct from benefits for ongoing maintenance. Extended deductions for arrears from all benefits from which my Department can deduct for ongoing maintenance prevent arrears from being deducted at the same time as deductions towards ongoing maintenance.

The maximum that can be deducted at any one time is always £8.40 to enable deductions for ongoing maintenance and arrears from universal credit where the non-resident parent has earnings and meets the criteria for the flat-rate maintenance calculation. My Department could already deduct for ongoing maintenance from universal credit where the non-resident parent had no earnings and met the criteria for the flat-rate maintenance calculation.

On protected trust deeds, the regulations extend the write-off powers to enable the Department to write-off

related to the Scottish protected trust deed, which is legally uncollectible as a result of this process.

These regulations extend the list of organisations that must provide information to my Department to include mortgage lenders and occupational pension providers. Previously, those organisations had to comply with such a request but it had to be carried out by an inspector visiting the premises.

The regulations make further technical amendments to change the way that the Department will calculate child maintenance liabilities for a parent who is claiming expenses. They also change the wording of the Child Support Fees Regulations (NI) 2014 to clarify and maintain the policy intent and they go on to state that any arrears that occurred on collect-and-pay or direct pay, which will be moved into the collect-and-pay service, will include the collection of fees, and that those fees are enforceable.

The two packages of regulations build on previous work to widen enforcement powers and close down loopholes. They also commit to the Department tackling the historic arrears that represent the child maintenance legacy schemes in a way that best balances the interests of parents and public funding.

The Department will further develop collection measures and information-gathering powers. These measures will help to make child maintenance fairer for all parents and ensure that we fully deliver on the commitments of the compliance and arrears strategy.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee considered these regulations at its meeting on 6 February. The Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 will revoke and re-enact the provisions of the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2018.

The regulations provide for the powers which were introduced in December 2018 to continue in force. Their main purpose is to improve how child maintenance liabilities are calculated, to increase the range of collection and enforcement powers, to help collect more money for children and to address historical arrears that have built-up under the legacy schemes.

I am glad to see this issue being brought forward as I understand that, for many parents, arrears in child maintenance can be damaging to relationships between resident and non-resident parents, which then has a knock-on effect on their children.

The Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 introduce a number of changes to child maintenance legislation. They will change the range of benefits from which arrears of child maintenance can be taken, and they expand the list of persons to whom the Department can write to request that information be provided.

The regulations also provide for child maintenance debt that was subject to a protected trust deed and that has expired without being converted to bankruptcy, and make minor and technical changes to the child maintenance calculation and fees regulations.

The Committee recommends that both the regulations be approved by the Assembly.

Ms Armstrong: I absolutely agree with the Chair of the Committee, which has already seen and considered part of the regulations. I have absolutely no problem with arrears being dealt with in this way — it looks like common sense because arrears can create emotional difficulties between partners who are no longer together and can lead to years of problems.

Just for clarification, when we look at regulation No. 3 about the joint and unlimited partnership accounts, I have a slight concern about how the amount is calculated. Is any consideration given to the non-resident partner's own children and whether the deductions that are being taken from that non-resident partner's future or other children that they have, in a way that does not leave them living in poverty? I completely appreciate ensuring that the children of parents who are no longer together must have child maintenance payments made, but I have always been concerned about the second family, and whether that family is taken into consideration when the calculations are worked out.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak, so I call the Minister to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Chair of the Committee for her words. Also, just to respond to Ms Armstrong, when those deductions are being looked at, those are considered. This is about dealing with legacy debt that is over 20 years old. As I said, part of the calculations were based on estimates, so they do not really reflect what the true income was at that time, and most of those will probably be written off.

Again, I thank Members for their consideration of this. I know that the regulations are quite technical and long and that they are dealing with legacy issues and debt. I commend them to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The regulations have already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved. — [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

2.45 pm

Pension Schemes Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Pension Schemes Bill dealing with collective money purchase benefits, the Pensions Regulator, pensions dashboards and further provision relating to pension schemes as contained in clauses 52 to 102, 117, 120 and 128 of, and schedules 4 to 6, 8, 9 and 11 to, the Bill as introduced in the House of Lords, to Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit on this debate.

Ms Hargey: I apologise that this is a long speech because it is technical, and I want to make sure that I do not leave anything out.

Although pensions are a devolved matter, in general, pension policy and legislation here operate in line with corresponding pension provision in England, Scotland and Wales and in line with section 87 of the NI Act 1998. In addition, the Pensions Regulator, the ombudsman and the pensions protection fund all operate here and in those other three jurisdictions.

Here in the North, provisions that mirror those made for Britain elsewhere in the Bill were included in the Bill in the absence of the Executive and functioning Assembly in order to ensure that the pensions system can continue to function properly with members' interests at its heart.

As with schemes operating here and across those other areas, it is highly desirable that the same regulatory framework is in place here and within the same time frame as in Britain to ensure that the people involved in those schemes are still protected and to facilitate compliance, planning and enforcement.

The Bill aims to help people plan for the future and to protect people's pensions by giving the Pensions Regulator greater powers to tackle irresponsible management of pension schemes, including actions by employers that could compromise the viability of a pension scheme. I, personally, very much support the principle that members' interests should be at the core of everything that we are doing.

The Bill makes provision for collective money purchase schemes, also known as collective defined contribution schemes (CDCs), where contributions into a scheme are pooled and invested to deliver an aspired benefit level. That builds upon and facilitates the initiative by Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union, which have concluded that the CDC scheme would offer better outcomes for the workforce than a traditional money purchase scheme.

It strengthens protections for scheme members to give the Pensions Regulator stronger powers so that savers can be confident that their pensions are protected and that the regulator is better able to take action if pensions are put at risk.

Members will be aware of several recent high-profile insolvency cases where employers have failed to give

the proper weight to their responsibilities to their defined benefit pension schemes. The Bill seeks to address that in range of ways: for example, a requirement on those responsible for corporate transactions to set out how they will mitigate against any adverse impact on the pension scheme and by enhancing regulatory information-gathering powers and powers to ensure that those responsible for schemes comply with pensions legislation.

There will also be new sanctions on those who wilfully or recklessly harm their pension scheme, including a maximum seven-year prison sentence and a civil penalty of up to £1 million.

The Bill increases transparency about individuals' pensions savings by producing a framework for pensions dashboards — a consumer-friendly digital interface to improve information for savers so that they can prepare for their retirement.

It delivers clearer scheme funding standards and defined benefit schemes and strengthens the regulator's enforcement of the improved system. That is particularly important in the changing defined benefit landscape, with many schemes closed to new members or future accruals. The aim of that is to help trustees to improve their scheme funding, invest in decisions and manage potential risk.

The Bill introduces new powers to protect pension savings to help scheme trustees ensure that transfers of pension savings are made to safe and non-fraudulent schemes. It ensures that the Pension Protection Fund can continue to administer the compensation appropriately and amends the definition of administration charges to make it clear which costs are covered by the definition.

Importantly, under the Bill, the power to make subordinate legislation and commence provisions relating to devolved matters will rest with the Department for Communities. Likewise, the powers of control over the subordinate legislation will rest with the Assembly.

The proposed changes are largely beneficial to scheme members. Pension dashboards will provide clarity regarding pension saving, while there will be the introduction of an important safeguard and deterrents against those who seek to avoid their responsibilities relating to pension schemes. Pension reform in recent years has meant that more people make provision for their retirement through saving into a workplace pension, while individuals have more flexibility over their pension at retirement. At the completion of the roll-out across the jurisdictions, over 10 million people were either newly saving or saving more into a pension as a result of automatic enrolment.

Although most private sector defined pension schemes are closed to new members and/or new accruals, the sector remains an integral part of the pensions system with around 10.4 million members relying on them. In addition, roughly 14,000 employers support defined benefit pension schemes, and around £1.5 trillion in assets are held by those schemes. The defined benefit sector is of crucial importance to the economy.

The Bill ensures that the pension system is fit for the future by strengthening it and introducing important safeguards and deterrents against those who seek to avoid their responsibilities. The provisions here were omitted from the Westminster Bill. It should be necessary

to table a further Assembly Bill to ensure that pension systems continue to function and that scheme members are not put at a disadvantage compared with those in Britain. As the Westminster Bill has not yet completed its passage through the House of Lords and has yet to be considered by the House of Commons, it is doubtful that a corresponding Assembly Bill could be introduced before the autumn at the earliest. The Assembly would be unlikely to complete that work before spring next year, assuming that a slot in the legislative programme could be obtained. I am also aware that there will be significant demands across Departments for Bills to be progressed through the Assembly before the end of the current mandate. Including the provisions for here in the Westminster Bill allows those important provisions to be enacted at the same time as they are in the other three jurisdictions. That provides legal certainty for schemes and employers to allow preparatory work; for example, for the introduction of collective money purchase benefits and pensions dashboards to proceed in tandem.

The use of the legislative consent motion in this case should not be seen as a precedent or an indication of how I intend to proceed further. I am aware of the Assembly's role in considering legislation, particularly the value of Committee scrutiny. I therefore anticipate, subject to the necessary approval, shortly bringing a Bill before the Assembly for the regulation of master trusts.

Again, I am grateful for the support from the Committee and request that Assembly agrees to the extension of the NI provisions in the Westminster pensions Bill.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee thanks the Minister for tabling the motion. Pensions, in general, are not often given the consideration that they deserve, and few of us tend to think years ahead — maybe not too many years for me — to a time when we will no longer work and will have to live off the state pension and whatever work-based pensions we have accumulated. Planning and preparing for retirement is, however, extremely important, and the provisions in the LCM will make that process more transparent and understandable.

Of course, in a devolved institution, we would all have liked to be here today considering an Assembly pensions Bill that dealt with the issues contained in the LCM. However, the Committee was advised that it was unlikely that such a Bill would be introduced until September at the earliest and would not achieve Royal Assent until spring 2021. In the meantime, pension protections for people in Northern Ireland would fall behind those in GB. In addition, officials noted that the working assumption was that an Assembly Bill would mirror the provisions in the current Bill. That reflects the fact that, while pensions are a devolved matter, to all intents and purposes in the UK there is essentially one system of pensions that includes numerous pension schemes in Northern Ireland. The Pensions Regulator, the Pensions Ombudsman and the Pension Protection Fund all operate on a UK-wide basis. Taking all that together, the Committee acknowledged that including the NI provisions in the Westminster Bill provided legal certainty for pension schemes and members. It will ensure that they will be enacted at the same time here as in the rest of the United Kingdom and allow the industry to begin any necessary preparatory work. The Committee was also assured that the power to make subordinate legislation on the Bill will

rest with the Department for Communities and that the powers of control over the subordinate legislation will rest with the Assembly.

Part 2 of the Bill establishes collective defined contribution schemes. Those schemes offer a target income at retirement, rather than a specified income. If the scheme is underfunded or overfunded, the level of member benefits can be adjusted. That will ensure that the assets of the collective fund are equal to the liabilities relating to the target incomes. The main advantage of that is that investment risk is spread across all members so that, potentially, there is greater certainty over retirement income. There is wide support for that type of scheme and, in fact, as the Minister said, the Communication Workers' Union and Royal Mail advocated it.

The Committee recognises that consumer protection is at the heart of the Bill. Part 3, in particular, gives stronger powers to the Pensions Regulator so that pensions can be better protected. For example, there will be greater sanctions for those who wilfully or recklessly harm their company pension schemes, including a maximum seven-year prison sentence and a civil penalty of up to £1 million.

Part 4 introduces pension dashboards. As I mentioned, having greater transparency allows people to better plan for their pensions. Gone are the days when a person would begin and end their career with one employer; indeed, the Government have estimated that an individual will have around 11 different jobs in their lifetime. That means many pension pots, which will make it difficult to work out just how much money you will have when you stop working. A pension dashboard is a digital interface that will present all your pension information from all sources in one place and, therefore, help you to better plan for your retirement. I understand that the dashboards were due to be launched in 2019, but, perhaps, the Minister could update us on when they will be operational.

Part 5 of the Bill, specifically clause 128, introduces schedule 11 and helps strengthen the regulator's enforcement of defined benefit schemes. The Committee welcomes the new powers, which, among other things, will help scheme trustees to ensure that transfers of pension savings are made to safe and not fraudulent schemes.

The Committee accepts that it is advantageous that any changes to the regulation of pensions as a result of legislation are made across all jurisdictions at the same time to ensure compliance and enforcement. We acknowledge that the Bill will strengthen pensions schemes by introducing certain safeguards and enhanced sanctions. For those reasons, the Committee supports the legislative consent motion.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for outlining the proposed changes to the Pension Schemes Bill and for providing the rationale for bringing the legislative consent motion to the House.

As the Chair of the Committee said, ultimately, it would have been preferable to have additional time for scrutiny and to bring in legislation via the Assembly, but I recognise that timing is a key factor. As the changes seek to provide additional protections, safeguards and options for members of schemes, any delay would be to the detriment of people here.

I concur with the Committee Chair's remarks about planning for retirement and the fact that it is never too early to do that. It is crucial that those pensions have the greatest possible security.

3.00 pm

The Bill will return to the Committee before it comes into effect around September, and I look forward to the opportunity to debate it further there.

Mr Durkan: Initially, when I saw this item coming to the Committee, it is fair to say that I winced. We had major concerns that not only were we asking another legislature to do our job for us, never mind what or who that legislature is, but we have been bitten badly by a legislative consent motion in the not too distant past, when the Minister's party and others gave consent to Westminster to legislate for us on welfare, and they ended up throwing in the ultra-draconian two-child rule and the barbaric rape clause for good measure.

While this Act relates to protections and benefits for our citizens, and we must ensure that people here do not miss out on their entitlements, there was a genuine fear, shared by many Committee members, that the goalposts might move and we could end up with a different piece of legislation that was much less positive and be powerless to do anything about it. We were very pleased to receive assurances, which the Minister reiterated today, that any changes will come back to us for scrutiny and approval. We support this on that basis. Every Member who has spoken so far has said the same: going down the LCM route is bad practice when dealing with devolved matters, but we recognise the need to do so here. It is yet another symptom of the three-year hiatus hangover, but we support it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister for Communities to make a winding-up speech.

Ms Hargey: I thank Members for their contributions. I thank the Committee members and Chair for their words and their support for the LCM and understanding of the reasons for it.

The pensions dashboard has not been fully developed yet. There is no firm date, at this point, for that. The focus is on ensuring that the right type of dashboard is developed, without necessarily rushing for a timescale. Staff continue to engage on that, and, once we have further information, we will update the Committee as soon as possible.

I thank other Members. People were concerned, and we do not hold our own financial levers. People will remember that, in 2015, financial sanctions were placed on the Assembly and on the block grant that we get because we cannot raise our own finances. If people are really sincere about calling out those who are responsible for policies such as welfare change, that is the British Government. As for the impact of all these changes, if you are looking more at issues of partition and its impact here, I think that the fact that we do not hold our own fiscal levers would be a more genuine debate to be had.

That said, I am keen to see the LCM go through for the reasons that I set out. It brings protections. We have a system that works across the jurisdictions, and the LCM ensures that people here, living in the North, are not left behind when we bring forward the necessary changes, which are about protecting their pension funds and how

those pension funds can be used. I thank Members for their contributions and, again, give the commitment that I will bring back any further changes to the House for scrutiny. I commend the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Pension Schemes Bill dealing with collective money purchase benefits, the Pensions Regulator, pensions dashboards and further provision relating to pension schemes as contained in clauses 52 to 102, 117, 120 and 128 of, and schedules 4 to 6, 8, 9 and 11 to, the Bill as introduced in the House of Lords, to Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Private Members' Business

Planning a Just Economic Recovery after the COVID-19 Crisis

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the unprecedented impact the COVID-19 global pandemic is having on our society and economy; commends the invaluable contribution made by our front-line workers who have provided vital service, selflessly, throughout this pandemic; believes that a fair and just economic recovery strategy is required in the aftermath of this crisis; agrees that an economic recovery strategy must not only recognise but also demonstrate that we value our front-line workers and want to protect them, and the most vulnerable, through any impending recession; understands that workers' rights, and public services must be protected; and commits to existing economic challenges being tackled by a just transition to a more high-skilled, regionally balanced and sustainable economy that works for workers, their families, and businesses; and calls on the Executive to ensure that these principles underpin an economic and society-wide recovery.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business

Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have ten minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Dr Archibald: Over the past few weeks, many people have expressed sentiments about how we need to do things differently in future, about learning the lessons of the pandemic and about valuing the key workers who have stepped up in the most difficult circumstances and have done more than just their jobs to serve wider society. However, if we want things to be different, we have to take action to make them different. We cannot simply rebuild what was there and return to business as usual. We must, here and now, plan for the economic and societal recovery that we want to see and put a strategy in place to action it.

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on our society and economy. Our Budget was already under pressure prior to the unprecedented crisis and our public services were struggling after a decade of austerity. Those challenges remain and we must all, collectively, continue to make the argument for investment in our public services. The outworking of the crisis must not be further austerity measures from the British Government to pay for it, and we should all be making the argument for economic stimulus. Otherwise, the interventions to date will have been in vain and we will see escalating unemployment, economic stagnation and greater inequalities. Frankly, business as usual will not be good enough. It would be a return to an economy that is based on inequality where the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor, with ingrained structural barriers across all facets of society. We must break down those barriers so that everyone has the opportunity to achieve and prosper in life.

The pandemic has changed things. For many, it has changed how we value and appreciate the small things that we may have taken for granted — seeing our families,

going for a drink with friends or training with our teams. It has changed things on a bigger scale too, such as how we work, transport choices or supply chain decisions. There is, of course, much still to be worked out about how things will operate as we reopen our economy and society. Our strategy for recovery must not just be about making things better for the economy but for society as a whole and for our planet.

I previously said that our economic and societal recovery should be based on some core principles. Those principles, in my view, should be a just transition to a net zero carbon society, supporting workers and families and supporting businesses to create and sustain employment. We are all well aware at this stage of the need to rapidly decarbonise to limit global warming to less than 1.5° in order to prevent further climate breakdown. A green recovery has huge potential to create high-skilled, well-paid employment through green skills development and infrastructure investment. There have been increasing calls over recent weeks from across the world, as well as locally last week when 40 organisations wrote to the joint First Ministers to prioritise a green recovery. At the weekend, the director general of the WHO urged us to:

“combat climate change and environmental destruction with the same seriousness with which we are now fighting COVID-19”.

I am, therefore, calling for the establishment of a just transition commission to bring together all the relevant partners to plan for how we achieve our climate targets and ambitions as a society. A green new deal was a commitment in New Decade, New Approach, which needs to be implemented as part of the recovery plan. A green new deal can stimulate economic activity by, among other things, rapidly switching to green energy, growing the green economy, building modern public transport infrastructure and retrofitting homes to conserve energy.

To support workers and families, we must address the longstanding issues in the local labour market, particularly the scourge of low pay and low productivity. Low pay causes in-work poverty and leaves families in danger of deprivation. Commitments in New Decade, New Approach provide a basis to tackle that. Powers to set minimum wage levels should be made a devolved matter, and we must strive to replace precarious work with high-skilled, secure, unionised employment. That will go some way to addressing longstanding low productivity levels. Strengthening collective bargaining through the recognition of unions in the workplace is also important in empowering workers.

Our communities have played a huge role throughout the crisis in supporting each other and the vulnerable. Other business models, such as social enterprises and cooperatives, bring important benefits, including investment, to communities. We should seek to build on the community solidarity that has been shown over recent weeks.

While we will always look outwards to achieve globally, we must also support our indigenous SMEs and microbusinesses to create and sustain employment. There is a need to review the remit of Invest NI to support the development and diversification of local and all-island supply chains, empower microbusinesses and entrepreneurs and realise the potential of the digital and green economies.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Go ahead.

Mr Storey: I have listened to the Member. A recurring question has come to me during all that she has said: who is going to pay for all of this? She talks about an “economic stimulus”. Those are great words. The party opposite cannot even support the North/South interconnector, which has benefits — and it is strange that I, from a unionist perspective, have support for that. When it comes to a beneficial connection between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland however, the party opposite cannot support it. Words are fine, but who is going to pay for the wish list that the Member is setting before us this afternoon?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. To be fair to him, that is an issue that Governments across the world are grappling with at this time. We all have to look at how we are going to do it in the future. Collectively, there is a need to address that.

A strategy of supporting our indigenous businesses should develop high-skilled employment in sectors that will help us to achieve our economic potential, fulfil our climate obligations and shield the economy against further COVID-type shocks. Crucially, we must also invest in apprenticeships and further and higher education to ensure that people have accessible opportunities to reskill and seize emerging opportunities.

Despite efforts to limit economic damage through such interventions as the job retention scheme and business support grants, there is a recognition that unemployment figures will likely soar in the weeks and months ahead. We must have a collaborative approach to responding to that, with the involvement of government, industry, education and the community and voluntary sector. The engagement forum, which was established by the Executive in response to the COVID-19 crisis, is the model of engagement and partnership that must be encouraged to continue. The involvement of wider civic society as not only stakeholders but partners will enable policy to be shaped to best respond to the needs of society.

The Executive will need tools to aid the type of economic recovery to which we aspire. My party colleague the Finance Minister has spoken about establishing a commission to evaluate the devolution of fiscal powers. That should be taken forward as part of the recovery planning, and we must look at what type of borrowing powers we can deploy. Economic and societal recovery post-COVID-19 must seek to address the fundamental underlying problems of the Northern economy. We must address the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, confront the severe economic threat of climate breakdown and prepare for the significant challenges posed by Brexit. In doing so, we must seek to advance the objectives of social and economic equality, sustainable economic development, regional balance and the protection of workers' rights and incomes.

I quote the director general of the WHO, again. He said:

“Decisions made in the coming months and implemented ... can lock in economic development patterns that will do permanent and escalating damage.”

Or, if wisely taken, can promote a healthier, fairer, and greener world."

I urge Members to support the motion. We will support the amendment put forward by the Alliance Party.

3.15 pm

Mr Muir: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "fair" and insert:

" , just and green economic recovery strategy is required in the aftermath of this crisis; agrees that an economic recovery strategy must not only recognise but also demonstrate that we value our front-line workers and want to protect them, and the most vulnerable, through any impending recession; understands that workers' rights and public services must be protected; commits to existing economic challenges being tackled by a just and green transition to a more high-skilled, regionally balanced and sustainable economy that works for workers, their families, and businesses; and calls on the Executive to ensure that these principles underpin an economic and society-wide recovery guided by a social partnership approach involving government, trade unions, businesses and the third sector."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. Unfortunately, I will not be able to call everyone who has indicated that they wish to speak, given the limitation on our time.

Mr Muir: I welcome the opportunity to thank our front-line workers and to speak on how specifically we can build a more inclusive, just and prosperous future out of the crisis that we currently face. To that end, I think that our proposed amendment enhances the motion, and I hope that Members will agree to support it today. I thank Dr Archibald for the support given.

I think that 2020 will be one of those iconic years etched into our memories as well as the history books. It is the end of one era and the beginning of a new one, which is perhaps why January feels such a long time ago. Economic orthodoxy has been turned on its head, and the necessity of protecting our people, health service and economy has required all of us to make sacrifices unknown in peacetime. Our front-line workers have helped keep our society running, from the doctors and nurses in our hospitals to carers in the community and supermarket workers keeping the shelves stacked. It falls to everyone to ensure that they are valued and cared for.

Sadly, I think that most will agree that a recession, perhaps a severe one, is impending. Although it may be somewhat inevitable, its full impact is not. People are facing uncertain times, and we must ensure that we protect the most vulnerable. We cannot allow the weight of the economic troubles to fall upon them. The cost of this must be shared out fairly through progressive taxation, ensuring that nobody is able to avoid their obligations by sending profits overseas. Right now, we are at a pivot point in history, and we should be looking to our future aspirations for both our economy and society. In doing so, we must ensure that development is both green and sustainable, as well as

structurally inclusive and fair, which our amendment seeks to do.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, understandably, been at the forefront of our minds in the past few months. We must not forget the ongoing global and existential crisis of climate change and environmental pollution. The monumental increases in air quality and falls in CO2 emissions that we have seen as a result of lockdown have only drawn greater attention to the remarkable health impacts of pollution. Indeed, it is estimated that, across Europe, around 11,000 lives have been saved by the reductions in nitrogen dioxide in the air. We have also seen a boom in active travel. I have never seen so many people in my life out on bicycles and walking and doing all sorts of things over the past number of months. That, again, not only represents environmental gains, because private cars are no longer clogging our streets, but serious health benefits. More than ever, people are recognising that a green economy is not only necessary to meet the demands of the future, but that it means a better quality of life.

However, change will not happen on its own. It requires us to act. The time has come for a green new deal to invest in skills, green energy and infrastructure as well as our telecoms network and support a just transition to the industries of tomorrow. I do welcome the announcement today that almost 200 companies are calling for the Prime Minister to launch a green recovery. It is businesses leading in these calls.

The risk of scarring life opportunities during economic change is serious, as we have seen in the late 2000s, particularly amongst young people. Signs so far suggest that young people are much more likely to be impacted by the shutdown and tend to be employed in seriously restricted sectors such as hospitality, tourism and retail. We must ensure that our young people have the skills required for the jobs of the future. Therefore, the Executive need to urgently consider targeted support to assist young people into training or to secure employment. The youth employment scheme, introduced by the former Employment and Learning Minister and my Alliance colleague, Dr Stephen Farry MP, is a good example of this. So, inclusiveness and engagement must be central in pursuing a just economic recovery.

That brings me to the concept of a social partnership introduced by our proposed amendment. The social partnership approach has been the norm in many European countries for decades. It brings together government, businesses, workers, unions and the third sector to provide input and make decisions on key economic and social issues. In regard to the model, the International Labour Organization has noted that:

"Engaging in dialogue, the social partners also fortify democratic governance, building vigorous and resilient labour market institutions that contribute to long-term social and economic stability and peace."

However, in the UK, industrial relations between workers, businesses and government have been more adversarial in tone than in the rest of Europe and decision-making has been more centralised. People have been continually told that work is the route out of poverty, yet wage growth in recent times has failed to keep up with increases to the cost of living. That has left many feeling powerless and forgotten in our economic system.

In recent times, Wales, which has historically been scarred by industrial strife and economic decline, has taken steps towards introducing a statutory basis for social partnership. That includes placing a duty on public bodies to work in social partnership and to promote fair work, as well as make fair work central in public procurement. This could provide a good model for change. Therefore, I hope that the Executive will seriously consider such a structural approach to rebuilding a fair and inclusive economy, safeguarding workers' rights and, indeed, restoring trust in government. I commend the Minister and her officials for the work done so far in relation to the Northern Ireland engagement forum on COVID-19. That has provided a good template for progress, and I hope that we can continue with that.

Before closing, I want to note another huge structural issue facing the future of our economy on which there has been a worrying lack of local input. It is the eternal elephant in the room: Brexit. With the additional damage of COVID-19 and the need to respond to the health crisis, an extension to the Brexit transition period is clearly required. It is difficult to see how the capacity exists to prepare to implement the protocol in the time period given and also respond to COVID-19. The last thing we need, as we try to chart a recovery, is more barriers and disruption.

In closing, I thank the relevant Members for bringing the debate today. This crisis has helped us see more clearly than ever the economic and social issues that face our society, and it provides a juncture for a rethink. Going forward, given our limited resources in Northern Ireland, we also press for a UK-wide commitment to rebuilding a comprehensive welfare system and to maintaining good public services, not threadbare ones. This means, for example, a health service that has money and staffing to see routine patients in weeks, not years, and it also means a social care system that values individuals and their rights, as well as providing care workers with a fair living wage and fair conditions.

Just as there was a post-war consensus, I hope that we can build a post-COVID consensus to properly engage people, businesses and others in the social and economic decisions that affect them; invest in our public services and in social security; and build a fairer, greener economy. I am happy to support the motion, but I encourage Members to support the amendment, which we believe puts a more specific focus on building an inclusive, just and green recovery.

Ms McLaughlin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Economy. This is a timely motion, as the Committee received a briefing on this issue from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) at last week's meeting.

While the Committee has not had an opportunity to agree a view on the motion and, therefore, I will not be able to support the motion on the Committee's behalf, nonetheless, members are on record expressing the Committee's thanks and admiration for the contribution made by our front-line workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to put on record again the Committee's deep gratitude for the Herculean efforts that those heroes have made to benefit us all. I am sure that all Members will echo that sentiment.

As I indicated at the outset, the Committee was briefed by ICTU and the Nevin Economic Research Institute last Wednesday about their vision for our economic recovery from the crisis. They, too, used the word "just". Like the Committee and all the other groups represented on it, the ICTU warmly welcomed the Economy Minister's establishment of the Labour Relations Agency engagement forum. That forum represents a unique approach to bringing together the public, private and trade union sectors to advise the Executive on their handling of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as offering suggestions for the recovery and rebuilding phase that we are now entering into and to which the motion refers. It brings together groups to advise the Executive.

Like the ICTU, the Committee believes that the forum has a role to play after the crisis as an advisory body to inform the Executive on the recovery and rebuilding of the economy. Indeed, the ICTU suggested that the forum could perform a useful function by advising the Executive on the Programme for Government, for example, and provide a place for social dialogue to consider solutions to problems facing the Executive and wider society. The ICTU suggested that its focus should be on the future of work, innovation, skills and productivity and on a revision of our investment in the economic development model.

The Committee has discussed the recovery and rebuilding phase that we now entering into, and members agreed that this tragedy offers us an opportunity to build in a way that recognises the mistakes of the past and does not repeat them, as well as an opportunity to horizon-scan for the skills and industries that will allow us to create greater prosperity for our people.

The Committee agrees with the view that the current job retention scheme, or furloughing, should taper off in a way that allows employers to bring back workers on a phased or part-time basis initially. The Committee believes that the recovery period is a time in which we could look to ensure that workers, particularly young people emerging into the workforce for the first time, are properly skilled. They need skills that will give them opportunities to engage with the jobs that will be created and the sectors that will be established in the months and years to come. Our young people in particular must leave school, training and further education with skills that are relevant to future jobs and industries. That requires a partnership among employers, schools, further education colleges and higher education institutions, as well as other training providers and, of course, the Executive as a whole. Such industries will include those involved in decarbonisation and in the development of a green new deal sector and jobs in it.

The Committee heard from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) last week. Members agreed with their analysis that, to have economic prosperity going forward, we must prioritise the revival of our village, town and city centres. As we build skills for the future, we must ensure that we begin to get our economy moving again and to fund the issues raised in the motion. The Executive need to provide for our centres to reopen while abiding by social distancing and other guidance. Such a revival needs to be supported by greater animation of those centres, as well by as marketing and promotion around shopping locally and using local services. That stimulation of localised growth is essential for a balanced

regional recovery and, in the Committee's view, makes sense as part of a collaborative regional rebuilding plan.

Small businesses and microbusinesses, along with social enterprises and start-ups, have been the hardest hit by the lockdown. They are the backbone of our local economy and therefore need direct financial support from the Executive. Businesses in those sectors are generally not Invest NI client companies. They must be prioritised, however.

The Committee agreed with SOLACE and NILGA that we need to provide incentives for people to acquire digital skills. Key to the working of that in future crises are reskilling and upskilling, through which we are more likely to develop a more sustainable —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Deputy Chair to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms McLaughlin: — and reactive skills base.

Councils have suggested to the Committee that that effort should be supported by skills academies and the creation of innovative hubs. Those will require a partnership with further and higher education and training providers and better and clearer —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Deputy Chair's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: — careers and skills advice.

Mr Middleton: As we look to the recovery, it is fair and right that, first and foremost, we think of all those who have lost their lives during this crisis. It is not easy to look towards the recovery stage when we are still trying to deal with keeping people safe. Nonetheless, we need to work to try to get our economy back up and running. To fit in with the message of the Northern Ireland Executive about staying home and saving lives, people need to work safely and save lives.

The number of deaths is now over 500, which is tragic. We thank our NHS staff and our other front-line workers for the work that they have done to keep that number down. The motion talks about our essential and key workers. Some of those workers never before would have felt that they were key: our shop workers; our delivery drivers; our cleaners; our postmen and postwomen; our bin collectors; our lorry, bus and train drivers; and our pharmacy workers. There are many more of them out there, and we need to reflect on how we better value their work. There would be no greater honour for them than if we were to review how we support them in order to ensure that they are very much part of the recovery phase as well.

Our community and voluntary sector workers and providers have also worked tirelessly to ensure that our most vulnerable are protected. Again, they very much need to be part of the recovery phase. I would not like to think that they will be seen as an easy target when savings need to be made. We need to look at the best way to utilise them, going forward, to ensure that we can get our economy back on track.

3.30 pm

The context of this discussion is, indeed, very worrying. In Northern Ireland, we know that our unemployment figures rose by almost 90% in April. Indeed, figures released

today by Ulster University about the economic impact are very startling. Ulster University refers to the economic impact, with 250,000 furloughed and laid-off employees in Northern Ireland, which is a significant number. Within my constituency, it talks about almost 16,000. Those are staggering figures, and we know that the Minister is doing all that she can to try and address the situation. However, she will need support, not only within her own Department, where people are doing a fantastic job, but from every Department. We need to put politics aside and ensure that we get our economy back up and running.

We very much welcome all of the assistance. We know that the grants of £280 million have ensured that businesses have been able to oversee this difficult period. The furloughing scheme has been a vital support. As we move into August, the part-time furlough scheme will be essential to ensuring that our hotels and industries have the support to meet their overheads as they start to reopen.

The Committee has taken evidence from NILGA and SOLACE in recent weeks, and we need to ensure that we work with them and our council chief executives. Again, they are on the front line and are vital to our economic recovery. In recent years, our councils have felt that they are merely consultees. We now need to see our councils as partners. Some of the fantastic initiatives announced by the Executive, such as our city deals, are going to be more important than ever to get our economy back up and running.

I want to put on record our thanks to the Minister and the Department for all their work. It has not been easy. There has not been a blueprint or a manual to try and get our economy back up and running. However, I am confident that if we all work together on this, we can get to a point where our economy thrives again.

In closing, I welcome the Minister's commitment to further indicative timings for our hotels. As a party, we have been at the forefront of fighting for businesses. We want to give clarity, but we must always be mindful of the fact that we are not yet out of this crisis. We need to listen to the medical advice and trust that the decisions will be taken as soon as possible and practical.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Chair of the Committee for the Economy for tabling the motion. Naturally, all of us will agree with its sentiments. It is the socio-economic equivalent of the moon on a stick, which is perfection for everyone — our workers, families and businesses — with everyone getting what they want. Sadly, sometimes, that is not always possible. However, it is what we should always desire to achieve.

For many of the businesses listening to the debate, if they are listening, they will hear that much of it is in the medium to long term and is about aspirations on how we change things and how things will look in the future. If I am the owner of a small business and I cannot afford to feed my family or pay my staff, I am worried about yesterday, today and tomorrow. Sadly, while it is desirable, I do not see it as essential, but we can get to that.

On the motion, I want to place on record the Ulster Unionist Party's heartfelt thanks to the front-line workers who have continued to keep our health service going and functioning over the last two and a half fairly horrendous months. Also, I thank the farmers, hauliers, food retailers, care workers, council employees and the many other

service providers who have not stopped for a single minute throughout the pandemic.

It is, as has often been said, the biggest health crisis of our lives and, certainly, it is for the NHS. It is the biggest worldwide pandemic since the Spanish flu of 1918. Much of the global economy has been put into cold storage and is waiting to come back out of that. There is little doubt that despite the unprecedented interventions by the British Government since March, in particular the Chancellor of the Exchequer's job intervention scheme and the self-employment scheme, there have been widespread redundancies. The big Government interventions and mechanisms such as the furlough scheme will end later in the summer.

Those on the Economy Committee know that I have spoken at length, both there and in the Ad Hoc Committee, to say that the economic recovery plan should have begun immediately. While it was a health crisis, it was quickly becoming the biggest economic crisis that we have ever faced. It is disappointing that we are now nine or 10 weeks on, and we are still, just about, bringing this to the Chamber. We are only looking into the medium and long term. It would have been much better to have been discussing it from the beginning. However, we are where we are. Whatever strategy the Executive bring forward, it needs to be radically redrawn from where it was.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that the Executive could learn a lot by looking at the Welsh model?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree absolutely. Those who have heard me speak before on this know that I have highlighted that from the start. Back at the end of March, the Welsh Government intervened with over £100 million, to give support to businesses that, perhaps, were not reached by the support that we have given.

I accept the point Mr Middleton made about the interventions that have been made already by the Executive, but out of 100,000-plus businesses in Northern Ireland, the overwhelming majority have still received very little support, aside from the furloughing scheme, which has been hugely beneficial. There are grants in there of up to £100,000, which would be massive for some of our companies. To a single business owner, £10,000 can be quite a lot but, if you are employing 15 staff, it is a week's wages. There are things that we could do in the here and now.

The Member is right — he has left now — to ask how we pay for this. That is so important. We need a complete reprioritisation of our Budget and what we spend. That will require difficult decisions from Ministers and Departments to end pet projects and schemes that were desirable three months ago. They are no longer desirable — yes, they are — but they are not essential. Business survival is essential. Families having jobs, putting bread on the table: these are essential. That means a complete reprioritisation about what we do and the money we spend, funnelling that money into companies, giving them the opportunity to expand, grow and create the jobs that we need to make our economy grow.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that the economic crisis that has been brought about by the COVID-19 will be surpassed if we do not address the climate crisis that is creeping up on us as well? The economic upheaval, and the change to our systems, lifestyles and businesses, will be even more drastic than those we are currently experiencing due to COVID?

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for her intervention. I absolutely agree. We all spoke in the Chamber — it feels like months ago now — when we discussed the climate emergency and the need to reprioritise our economy. Northern Ireland can lead the way in the drive towards zero emissions, without a doubt. That has to inform any part of our medium- to long-term economic strategy. However, it goes back to my original point: families and companies are about to go under. While, yes, that should be taken into consideration, those companies and families need impetus and support now. It is a combination of short-term interventions and looking at a medium- to long-term strategy.

While this is a health crisis, the economy is everything. Without taxation, a buoyant stable economy and creating the money to pump into our vital NHS and other public services, we have absolutely nothing. Governments do not create jobs, businesses do. We might create the conditions whereby these companies can create the jobs but, ultimately, it is down to businesses to create these jobs and further them. Workers want better wages and conditions, but Northern Ireland companies, en masse, look after their employees and workers a lot better than I see in other countries. We should be proud of the companies that we have here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Stewart: We should do absolutely everything we can.

There is so much to say about this but, ultimately, I would like to see a Northern Ireland-first approach to public-sector procurement, channelling as much money as possible from our public-sector procurement scheme into giving a lifeline to companies that are here now.

Mr Dunne: The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone across Northern Ireland. These few months have undoubtedly been very challenging and difficult for the economy. It is important to recognise and pay tribute to all the key front-line workers, alongside the National Health Service heroes. They have continued to work through the pandemic, taking personal risks and sacrifices, providing essential services. They include people within the food supply chain, transport workers, pharmacists, carers, farmers, fishermen, essential retail staff, waste collection operators, emergency service personnel, postmen and postwomen, teachers and funeral directors, amongst many others. They all deserve fair play and fair pay.

The Economy Minister has recognised the significant challenges that are faced by local businesses, employers and employees, and has helped to deliver various support measures that have been a real lifeline, with over £280 million being allocated through the £10,000 and £25,000 grant schemes in recent weeks. With those measures, alongside the various income support and furlough schemes from the UK Government, we have benefited from one of the best economic rescue packages in the

world. For many people, being part of the United Kingdom has been crucial to short-term survival.

With the challenges that have been faced, now is the time for action to rebuild the economy. I very much welcome the Economy Minister's commitment to restarting and rebuilding the economy, as announced on Friday with the publication of 'Charting a Course for the Economy — Our First Steps'. The Chancellor's announcement on Friday of tailored adjustments to the UK Government's support measures also backed the reopening and kick-starting of our economy. While we must continue to be guided by medical and scientific advice, there is a desire for clarity on the various phases of recovery. I welcome the latest announcements on the reopening of non-food retail and believe that there are further opportunities for other businesses to reopen in a safe and controlled way, including those on high streets, which will need support as they reopen their doors on a phased basis. Estate agents are an example. That sector is keen to get going as interest builds in the housing market. That includes interest in the handover of new homes where construction work has progressed, especially among first-time buyers who are keen to get their new homes.

Buying from and supporting local businesses will be crucial for recovery and for the economy to rebuild and gain confidence again in towns, cities and villages. As has already been mentioned, councils must also step up and work in partnership with businesses and central government. The hospitality, retail, leisure and tourism sectors will also need continued support on the road to recovery. There are real opportunities for those sectors, including for the local tourism product as it rebuilds and taps into the desire for domestic holidays at home, which are trendily named "staycations". Today's announcement by the Minister to reopen hotels, guesthouses and caravan parks from 20 July is a welcome step forward. The focus on a regionally balanced economy in the motion is constructive, but we also have a responsibility to grow Northern Ireland's national and global competitiveness. We must build on its reputation for world-class and advanced technologies, skills and manufacturing. We have seen recent investment in cybersecurity. I believe that there are further exciting opportunities to grow those sectors in partnership with our universities and regional colleges through innovation and development of new skills.

Real opportunities are ahead. We must all play our part in supporting the recovery as Northern Ireland reopens.

Ms Mullan: I speak in favour of the motion and commend its sentiments. However, just to pass a motion in the Assembly is not sufficient; we must convert its sentiments into practical strategy and implement that strategy in full. Therefore, I call on the Minister for the Economy to instruct her officials to begin immediately the process of planning for a just recovery from both the health crisis that we are experiencing now and the economic challenges that we face at the other side of the pandemic.

It is not sufficient to join in the weekly Thursday night clap for NHS workers if we do not commit to ensuring that their pay and conditions equal the care and diligence that we demand of the health service. No more should we feel that we can refer to certain grades of workers as "low-skilled"; low-paid, yes, certainly, but low-skilled, no. Those workers, be they home-care workers, delivery drivers, shelf stackers, counter assistants or any of the multitude of workers who

have earned the description "essential" over the past number of months, must never be left behind again.

They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, which must include the receipt of a living wage and proper, protected working conditions. We must also strive to support and promote our small and medium-sized enterprise and hospitality sectors, which, in many cases, have taken a major hit to their viability. They are the backbone of our local economies, and we must devise imaginative ways to ensure that they not only survive but thrive.

Finally, I believe that we all accept that the pandemic has changed the manner in which we will conduct almost every aspect of our lives. It would be remiss of me, as Deputy Chair of the Education Committee, not to recognise the challenges ahead for our educators. Therefore, I call on the Minister of Education to re-evaluate the education model now in practice and to devise and prepare new, sensitive ways of progressing our children through the different stages of primary and secondary education. The old way of doing education will not be compatible with the new conditions and requirements that will be expected from educators or students. We need to get this right. Remember the old saying: fail to prepare, prepare to fail. We cannot afford to fail our future generation of essential workers, leaders and educators.

3.45 pm

Mr Stalford: In moving his amendment, Mr Muir referred to economic orthodoxy being turned on its head. I think that it was Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven who said that pennies did not fall from heaven; they have to be earned here on Earth. It is important, in the debate, that we are cognisant of that fact. As my colleague from East Antrim said, the economy is everything. It pays for our public services. It pays for our education, speaking of which I put on record my thanks to Miss Bannister, Mr Hay and Mr Jennings, the three schoolteachers who have a role in the education of my children. They make a valiant contribution, along with all public workers and key front-line staff.

Nearly nine weeks into this situation, we have to be aware of the massive damage that our economy is sustaining. The scale of the interventions that have been made is unheard of in peacetime. The fact that such interventions can be made at all is proof of how much better off we are as part of the United Kingdom. We have a Government who can make such interventions and spend such money protecting businesses and the economy. However, we also need to be honest. I mentioned my children. My children will spend a significant portion of their working life paying off the debt that these measures accrue. The longer the economy continues in lockdown, the more of their working life all our children will spend paying this money back. Pennies do not fall from heaven; they have to be earned. That is why I welcome the actions that the Economy Minister has been engaging in during the crisis. She has behaved responsibly and in a statesmanlike manner. She has balanced the need to protect public health, insofar as is possible, with the need to ensure that the economy can function again when the present restrictive measures are lifted.

The £280 million worth of grants and the furlough scheme were mentioned. I hope that Mr Muir will not think that I am picking on him, but he also mentioned the post-war consensus that obtained between 1945 and 1979. I remind

him gently that Keynesian economics made the UK an economic basket case. Not for nothing were we referred to as the "sick man of Europe" during that period. However, I leave that for historians to argue.

We cannot keep the productive element of our economy, which pays for everything around us, in lockdown for a second longer than it needs to be. I therefore welcome the recent announcements that the Minister has made, particularly about retail.

I think that other Members are right — I said this at the most recent meeting of the Economy Committee — that one of the things that have changed as a consequence of the crisis is that our perception of what is and is not important work has changed. My wife works in B&M on the Cregagh Road, and I dare say that, for the last nine weeks, people have thought that she is more important than I am. Of course, I always think that *[Laughter.]* That is why I am putting it in Hansard for her to read later. People's perception of what is and is not priority employment has changed, and that can only be welcomed as a good thing.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister in more detail the plans that the Executive have to lead us out of lockdown and to get the engine of our economy ticking again.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member used a risky set of words that he may have to pay for later *[Laughter.]*

Mr McAleer: I take the opportunity to pay tribute, in my role as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs, to all our farmers as front-line workers for producing our food throughout the pandemic. We have around 25,000 farms in the North, and they support the employment of 48,000 people across the food and drink industry. It is a huge contributor to our economy, with a £4.5 billion turnover last year. As well as having a huge impact on the economy, farming is a way of life, and those of us who represent rural constituencies know that it is a way of life for many people and supports many others. It is a key employer here.

Agriculture is under pressure. There are poor profit margins, the cost of production exceeds farm-gate prices and there are rising input costs every year. When we were gathering evidence on the Agriculture Bill recently, researchers from Queen's University told us that, without the direct payments, 30% of farms would immediately collapse. No doubt, since the COVID pandemic started, that figure will probably increase. The single farm payment accounts for over 80% of income for farmers, and farmers' incomes, even before the COVID pandemic, was decreasing year-on-year. Last year, we saw a 26% decrease in their incomes. That is very stark in some sectors. If we take the farmers in the areas of natural constraint (ANC) scheme, which covers the beef and sheep farmers, we see that their predicted income for this year is £10,000, and that is if they are lucky. I understand that, according to NISRA, the weekly wage here is £535. The beef and sheep farmers in the North get less than the average weekly wage. It is very stark, and they are the producers of our food.

The other point I want to make about moving into an economic recovery is that it is so vital that the farming sector is protected. It also needs to be looked at across the island. Any future economic recovery has to look at

agriculture and food production across the island. For example, we export about half a million sheep to the South, and they export about half a million pigs to the North. About 75% of our beef is exported across the water to Britain. Unfettered access north, south, east and west is very important to us.

Brexit, of course, has thrown a bit of a spanner in the works, because the British market is so crucial to here. We export 87% of our agri-food to it. The British market is so crucial, but the failure of the British Government to incorporate minimum food standards in their Bill has opened the door to Britain importing cheap, low-standard food, which will more than likely destroy the market for farmers here. We need to look throughout the rest of Ireland and beyond to the EU and other places to find new markets.

the future of agriculture and a future recovery require us to look at our indigenous food security, and we can see the importance of that with COVID and the volatility of the world stage. Things can change on a global basis, which underlines the importance of having our own secure food supply here.

Before I conclude, I want to say that isolation is an absolutely huge issue in rural communities. On a regional basis — I am surrounded by a couple of north-west MLAs — the likes of the A5 and rural broadband are hugely important in connecting and reconnecting isolated communities at this time. On the funding stuff and what we want to see in the future coming out of this, we want to see our Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) budget given legal protection in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and, of course, we want to see the lost funding from the rural development programme. We are losing £80 million from priority 6 of the rural development programme as a result of Brexit. We need to see the UK shared prosperity fund matching or replacing that lost EU funding, because those projects are so crucial for community hubs, community support and village renewal. We have seen how important that network has been in the response to the crisis.

In conclusion, I commend the motion. I tabled it, so I obviously support it. Looking into the future, unfettered access east-west and North/South —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr McAleer: — and replacement of our lost EU funding.

Mr Allister: I can readily join in saluting our front-line workers, who have been magnificent throughout this matter across our Province, but I have to say that, when it comes to the motion as a road map to get us back on the path to economic prosperity, I despair. It is like any other socialist manifesto that I have read. It is all about promises and hope but has no answers. Look at the motion. When it comes to restarting our economy, what does it say? Nothing. When it comes to support for business, what does it say? Nothing. When it comes to recognising that wealth creation is key to job creation, what does it say? Nothing. When it comes to talking about economic prosperity, what does it say? Nothing. When it comes to speaking about global competitiveness, nothing. When it comes to saying that we must move our economy from its superdependence on the public sector, nothing. When it comes to the issue of competitiveness, nothing to say. And, of course, when it comes to who will pay, nothing

to say. It is a motion that, frankly, might be verbose in proclaiming virtuous things but provides nothing in terms of taking us forward. It is not much help that the only amendment to it that has been permitted is one that simply adds a green flavour. There was another amendment that did, at least, talk about the urgent need to restart economic activity, but it did not merit attention on the Order Paper. We are left with this wish list of a socialist nature, which does not really take us very far.

I want to say this to the Minister: if she wants to do something green that is based not in sentiment but in manufacturing reality, I direct her attention to supporting Wrightbus. Wrightbus in Ballymena is moving forward as a world leader in hydrogen-driven buses and vehicles. If she really wants to create a hub in Northern Ireland for green, clean, safe energy and its use across our transportation sector, as opposed to those who pontificate about the sentiment of the green economy, there is a reality of the green economy that could and should be tapped into.

Nothing would please me better than to see my constituency become a hydrogen hub built around Wrightbus, so that we could see the progression and so that Translink could be supplied with hydrogen buses and all those things could be advanced.

A little economic forethought and a little economic reality would be a lot preferable to the sentiment that floats around in the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Matthew O'Toole, who will have the remaining four minutes of the debate, with or without interventions.

Mr O'Toole: I will be concise. I support the motion and the amendment, although, at the risk of sounding like I agree too much with the previous speaker, which would not do at all —.

Mr Allister: Please do not [*Laughter.*]

Mr O'Toole: Well, it is difficult to find much to disagree with in the motion or the amendment. Nevertheless, I and my party support them. The urgent thing is that we move on from the sentiment in a motion such as this to hard, practical policy.

The COVID crisis has illustrated to us an enormous number of things that were probably known before but have become starkly obvious in the last three months. Lots of people have talked about the importance of key workers. That is absolutely true — Mr Stafford put it very well when he talked about his wife's job — but the absolute harsh reality is that, in the next few months, the COVID crisis will underline long-term structural weaknesses that have afflicted this economy not just for months but for years and generations. I am afraid that it is no good parties from different parts of the House who have presided over the repetition of the same policies, lamenting the continuation of those structural challenges. We need hard action and practical policy to change them. The year 1848, which, I am sure, historians among us will know as the year of multiple revolutions in Europe, was described famously as the turning point in history when history failed to turn. Let us hope that 2020 is not the turning point when history fails to turn, at least in Northern Ireland.

I talked about the long-term structural challenges that our economy faces. Well, what are they? We have been for a long time the most unproductive part of these islands. We have the most unproductive economy. I respect unionist

Members talking about the role that the UK Exchequer has played in helping businesses and do not deny that. My God, who could? Businesses that have been in receipt of Treasury funding are, of course, grateful for not having gone out of business. I would say, however, that, as a long-term economic strategy, sheer supplication and saying that all we can do is rely on money from the UK Exchequer is not sensible. That is why I agree with Caoimhe Archibald and why I have been urging her colleague the Finance Minister to progress ideas for a long-term fiscal commission to look at how we raise revenue here to pay for public services. I say that as some who is proudly a member of a social democratic, centre-left party. We need to raise revenue in Northern Ireland, and we need to direct that revenue towards the urgent priorities that we all can agree on. We can all agree that we have long-term underinvestment in our infrastructure. We can all agree that we need to transition to a greener, lower-carbon economy. It would be much better for us if we were able to raise the revenue and decide on those priorities ourselves here, but we have yet to have, I am afraid, a short- or long-term economic recovery strategy for the Executive and an agreed, updated set of Programme for Government targets.

What do we need? We need a serious set of long-term, joined-up economic and fiscal policies. We do not need, with respect, pop-up policies, such as the announcement around hotels being able to open but without a date for taking bookings. I do not mean to pick on one issue, but it highlights a problem that has been endemic to governance in this place for the last number of years: unrelated, pop-up policy and things that do not make a lot of sense as part of a joined-up picture but kind of work because a particular lobby group has asked for them.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I rapidly approach the end of my four minutes. I could go on and on. The motion and the amendment are drawn widely, and it is hard to agree or disagree with them. While I will support them, by far the most important thing to say is that we move urgently and rapidly to agree priorities that allow us to deliver the just economic recovery and lower-carbon economy that we clearly all want.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, to respond to the debate. You will have up to 15 minutes.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. To you and the proposer of the motion I apologise for being a couple of minutes late at the start.

Events moved a lot quicker in the Chamber today than I had anticipated, so my apologies.

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on our economy and society, and I listened with interest to Members' contributions today. I reassure the Member for East Antrim that, although this is the first time that we have had the opportunity to debate this in the Chamber, my Department has been working on this from the start.

Of course, today, our thoughts are with the families and communities of those who have suffered pain and loss, and it is right that we recognise those who have been on the front line during this time. This cuts across the public and private sectors. As well as the heroic work of those in the NHS, we would not have been able to cope without

the work of hauliers, retail workers and other key, front-line staff. This crisis has shown how essential their work is.

The motion calls on us to protect the vulnerable through any impending recession. I want to be clear. Economists will define what is or is not a recession, but those who have already lost their job will not need an economist to tell them about the state of the economy.

Some six years of progress on jobs was lost when the Northern Ireland claimant count increased by 26,500 people in a single month. Unfortunately, we can expect unemployment to increase again. The Bank of England has forecast a UK-wide increase in the unemployment rate of around five percentage points for the second quarter of 2020 when compared to the unemployment rate just before the outbreak. For Northern Ireland, that could mean an increase of around 50,000 — around double the rise seen in the latest claimant count figures.

Supporting the vulnerable, those on low incomes and those who have already lost their job is not future work; it is for the here and now. The first step in protecting the most vulnerable is in safely reopening our economy so that those who have lost jobs can seek new employment and we limit the number who become unemployed. Construction, manufacturing and retail are opening. Today's approach to hotels, bed and breakfasts, caravans and self-catering accommodation is a further step, but we must move safely, in line with the medical and scientific advice. I have been impressed by those sectors and how they have adapted. Significant changes have been made to make sure that workers are safe at work.

We must also move beyond the reopening of our economy to planning for the future of our economy. A strong economy benefits everyone in society. I value economic growth because I am aware of the alternative. We have lived through recessions, have seen how unemployment affects physical and mental health and have seen closed shops and factories in local towns. No one wants to return to that.

There are significant challenges in building a stronger economy. The world has changed rapidly. We cannot say with any authority what it will look like in a year's time. As an economy, we rely on consumer spending. If people have limited opportunities to spend money in their local shops and restaurants, that will limit the ability of retail and hospitality here to continue to operate.

The tourism sector has been, perhaps, the hardest hit by the present crisis and by the long-term impact on travel. While many businesses in that sector have adapted, it is likely that growth will be difficult to achieve, even in the medium term.

The motion calls for a just transition to an economy centred on more people working in higher-paying jobs. To achieve that, we will need to focus on sectors that can deliver higher-paying jobs. Looking to the future, I think that there is likely to be potential for growth in life and health sciences. Similarly, the digital sector is likely to continue to grow. As my colleague from north Down indicated, the recent good news on cybersecurity jobs in Belfast shows that not only is Northern Ireland out in front in training and education in those sectors, but it is competitive on a global scale. Our advanced manufacturing sector also has strong potential, and tourism has been one of our success stories over recent years, and one that I am determined to support as it gets back on its feet.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving way. I know that she is working on a tourism recovery plan. Can she say more about the short-term for the tourism sector? It would appear very unlikely that this year, and possibly next, that we will be anywhere close to the kinds of markets that we had access to. Which markets for this summer, and, indeed, the rest of the year, is Tourism NI prioritising?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his intervention. We are working, with our steering group, with all aspects of that sector. It is clear to us that in the immediate future the domestic market within the British Isles will provide us with much of our tourism activity. I spoke to North American tour operators last week who indicated that there is still a strong desire to visit Northern Ireland. Many of the groups that they had booked for this year have rebooked for the next season. I think that we will have to rely on the market at home, but we are, and will continue to be, attractive to other markets, particularly the North American market.

We live in a society where inequality and poverty are persistent problems. This crisis has so far impacted most on those on low incomes and young people. The opportunities that are likely to come in the years ahead will be disproportionately in sectors where specific skills are required, so we must ensure that those who lose jobs in other sectors are given the support that they need to upskill in areas where there is demand.

I have been struck over the past number of months by the changes in our environment: fewer people driving to work, more people out cycling or walking. Those are positive changes and many people have reflected on how this could reshape how we appreciate our environment and protect against climate change.

The proposer of the motion advocates a new deal, but economic recovery, I stress, must be sustainable and provide growth opportunities for the private sector. In Northern Ireland, we have already been meeting some of our energy targets. We have led the way in developing renewable electricity to meet the Executive's 40% target. That success has helped to develop a low-carbon and renewable energy economy of 3,500 businesses, 5,500 jobs and £269 million worth of exports. We need to further develop that part of the economy.

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. For some Members, the idea of a command economy might be appealing. The truth of the matter is that only through having a free economy that is generating wealth can any of the aims in this motion, lofty as they are, be achieved. Would the Minister agree?

Mrs Dodds: We need our economy to function in order to provide for our public services and to help us to protect the most vulnerable, so I am absolutely behind businesses that seek to create wealth and opportunity for people. That is an appropriate way for this House to go.

I reassure the Member for North Antrim that I have already been speaking to Wrightbus. This week, I will convene a meeting between Wrightbus, my Department's officials and Invest Northern Ireland to investigate how Northern Ireland can benefit from greater job opportunities using the technology and research that is available in the north Antrim area to promote the hydrogen project. I hope that we will be able to make progress on that.

4.15 pm

As the Minister for the Economy since the crisis first struck, I have been aware that, while it was primarily a health crisis, it was always going to become a grave economic crisis. Throughout, I have ensured that my Department and its arm's-length bodies are working to support business in any way that we can. As some colleagues have referenced, that has included a social partnership with the engagement forum, which was asked to do two specific tasks: to look at the essential worker's list and to give safety advice.

To the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy, I should say that, in the Programme for Government, it is the responsibility of the First and deputy First Minister not just to reference something like the engagement forum, but to consult far and wide on this particular and very important piece of programming.

The Department also moved to bring unprecedented levels of support to businesses across Northern Ireland. The business grant schemes were designed to protect jobs, prevent business closures and to promote economic recovery. I welcome the uptake of those schemes. To date, we have issued over 22,000 payments through the £10,000 grant scheme, which represents over £220 million in support. There have been 2,600 payments made through the £25,000 grant scheme, which represents £65 million of support to businesses in retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure.

The extension of the rates relief to those sectors for the year, and to everyone for the first four months of the rates year, is of enormous value to businesses as they try to plot a way forward.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: No, I am not going to give way because I am rapidly running out of time and there are other things that I need to get through.

Along with those supports, there have been those at a national level: the job retention scheme, the self-employment scheme and the access to finance schemes. Those have been vital in keeping businesses going.

On tourism, I have established the tourism recovery steering group, which brings together the private and public sectors to plan for recovery. That group, which is supported by Tourism NI, will play a key role as government and industry work together to help our tourism and hospitality sector find its way back to full potential.

There has been some discussion about the need to invest in infrastructure to rebuild our economy. The past few months have shown us that broadband infrastructure is a vital part of our economy. We will not be able to build a regionally balanced economy without investment in broadband. Project Stratum seeks to use the £165 million of funding that is available from the confidence and supply deal to increase and improve broadband services, and that is primarily across rural areas of Northern Ireland. The target intervention area consists of 79,000 premises, 97% of which are rural. The contract award is expected in September 2020, with a full deployment in March. That is the type of long-term infrastructure project that we will need to ensure that businesses can prosper anywhere in Northern Ireland.

I have introduced legislation to ensure that workers who are prevented from taking their annual leave because of the pandemic can carry over some of that leave into the next two years. In conjunction with the Minister for Communities, I have introduced legislation to ensure that furloughed workers who are entitled to statutory family-related payments will not lose out. That goes together with my wider plans for ensuring that our employment legislation gives people the support that they need. For example, I recently announced my intention to consult on proposals to put in place provisions for parental bereavement leave and pay.

This has been an unprecedented few months. We have responded —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Minister to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs Dodds: — as quickly as possible and have delivered things that would have been thought of as impossible in normal times, but there is more to do. I look forward to setting out a long-term economic strategy and working with the House to ensure that families and jobs in Northern Ireland are our highest and utmost priority.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call John Blair to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member will have up to five minutes.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for her statement and thank the proposers of the original motion for accepting our amendment. I thought originally that I was coming to respond to the amendment only, but I should be able to make some comments in response to remarks made. Before I do so, I will make some comments of my own.

I will start by adding to the thanks paid to our front-line workers. I am hopeful that the debate today and the sentiments expressed will offer them some reassurance that we are looking to safeguard the services that those people provide for the future as we begin to look for recovery and the necessary societal change.

There will be many lessons learned, and some have been referenced already today, from the COVID period. We will, I am sure, reflect for some time on the human loss, the changes in our methods of governance and, of course, the time when our interaction with others was seemingly stopped completely. However, there are positives, even in these darkest of times, to be taken from what we have learned thus far. I want to mention in particular the collaborative working that is taking place in government and in Departments. Hopefully, the Minister will take back to her officials, as I have said here with regard to other issues, our sincere thanks for the work done in an ever-changing environment.

It would be remiss of me not to mention also the most outstanding community reaction that there has been to assist those most in need. We have seen that in every locality. I want to draw down two examples that relate to how we can better facilitate a just and economic recovery, which is the focus of the motion. First, the collaborative approach, which I mentioned and which has been beneficial at this time of crisis, should become the working model for the future. It is essential that government — regional, national and local — work together with communities to ensure mutual understanding of challenges and to shape solutions. That, in itself, might

help to embrace the community spirit demonstrated so that those people who have made that huge effort in recent times can feed in to the near future, the medium future and the longer-term future.

Also, the green new deal, which has been spoken about today, is not merely aspirational; it is a commitment in a document called, 'New Decade, New Approach', which made it more attractive for some of us to be part of the Government. That is about making sure that we make and meet a commitment and nothing more than that. I will now turn to —.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Blair: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member agree with me that the commitments outlined in the European Commission to building an EU-wide green new deal approach offer some opportunity for the Northern Ireland institutions to look at how we could be a part of that, specifically in relation to the protocol?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Blair: I agree totally. It is a matter that should be considered going forward by all of us but, specifically, by the Northern Ireland Executive. That green new deal would bring with it economic benefits to exploring and developing that circular economy. It will require new expertise. It will present opportunities for new learning experiences, and, in addition, it will bring opportunities to allow individuals to develop their own skills as well as new skills to help to provide this greener, cleaner future.

I will turn now to the comments made in the Chamber. I am very pleased that most of them, with one notable exception, were wholly supportive of the proposal and the amendment. Sinead McLaughlin mentioned the need for social dialogue, which I referenced a moment ago. Gary Middleton spoke very clearly about our need to protect the vulnerable. John Stewart referenced to some extent small businesses and the challenges that will exist around that going forward. Gordon Dunne mentioned the rescue packages that are already in place. Christopher Stalford paid tribute to government for the measures that are there and did not rule out that we have to look at exploring new measures as well. Declan McAleer, who is no longer in the Chamber, mentioned the agriculture sector challenge, and I will explore that with Declan and others through the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Matthew O'Toole, in his closing remarks, mentioned support for the motion, which is very welcome.

In reference to Mr Allister's comments, I really want to stress that I am not averse at all to exploring opportunities at Wrightbus or anywhere else because some of us are not afraid of referencing aspiration at the same time as trying to deal with desperation or deprivation. Those things are not mutually exclusive. It is perfectly doable to work on all those matters at one time. All of that can be done —.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that we need to build back better and that the time is now for the Executive to bring forward a green new deal for Northern Ireland to decarbonise, reboot our economy, create jobs, improve our health, protect our environment and, ultimately, save our planet? Not in the future, but now.

Mr Blair: I do agree. That would meet the commitment that I mentioned a moment ago that is in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. I think that 90% of his amendment is perfectly fine. Does he share my concern, and that of many trade unionists, that the social partnership approach, in the South of Ireland in particular, has led to increased inequality, particularly in relation to the wealth gap?

Mr Blair: That makes it all the more important that we examine that pathway at all levels of government — national, regional and local.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Blair: All of the sentiments that have been expressed — certainly those in support of the motion and the amendment — can be done in the spirit of the motion; involving, providing for and protecting our people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Gildernew: I want to start by touching on where we started this morning: a debate about the murder of George Floyd and the racism that was inherent in that. I also want to point out that it is not just racism that people who suffer disadvantage to that level are struggling with. It is often rooted in inequality: inequality of circumstance, inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcome right across the system. That inequality bleeds into economic systems across the world; it curtails them and stops them from building balanced economies, as we have heard today.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, those who in the past were referred to as "low-skilled" or "non-essential" workers are on the front line in our response. *Caithfidh luach na n-oibrithe a aithint. Ní leor torann seanchaite; is gá cóir agus coinníollacha oibre a chosaint. Ní mór dó seo bheith mar chuid de aon phlean téarnaimh.* In any economic strategy, their value must be recognised, not through platitudes but by paying them decent wages and protecting their working conditions.

Ms McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gildernew: I will.

Ms McLaughlin: Does the Member believe in an equal society and does he believe that we need a subregional balance in our economy as we emerge from lockdown? Derry and the north-west have the highest levels of unemployment of any region in the United Kingdom and we consistently attract the lowest number of jobs related to Invest NI. What are the Member's thoughts on that?

Mr Gildernew: I agree with the Member on that and will address that very issue in my remarks.

The economic strategy must include equality in infrastructure, particularly in the provision of broadband in rural communities, and I welcome the Minister's news on that. I have a slight concern because the figure of 79,000 homes or premises was. I have been involved in meetings and my understanding was that the figure would be 100,000 premises. I fear that some of the premises with the worst provision will still fall through the net. However, that is work for a future day with the Minister.

Project Stratum must proceed as soon possible so that students, farmers, businesses and entrepreneurs in the far reaches of Fermanagh, Tyrone and mid-Ulster have the same opportunities to grow and succeed. Their success is vital to us sustaining our rural communities in a balanced way. Tá fáilte le cur roimh na cinntí faoin scoil leighis i gColáiste Mhig Aoidh agus roimh na city deals leis an mhaoiniú i réigiún an iarthuaiscirt a chur ina cheart. Caithfidh an plean straitéiseach geilleagrach leanstan ar an dóigh seo le go mbeidh cothromaíocht thíreolaíoch agus réigiúnach i grollár cheapadh polasaí. The decisions on the medical school at Magee and the city deal are welcome first steps in redressing the historic underinvestment in the north-west region and west of the Bann generally. The economic strategy must continue along those lines, with geographical and regional balance at the core of all policy decisions.

I declare an interest in that for most of my life I have been very much involved in either running or owning a small business. Small businesses employ huge amounts of our population.

They are responsible for huge amounts of innovation and, in the mid-Ulster and Tyrone areas, in particular, engineering and food processing companies are the economic drivers of prosperity. Those businesses must be assisted with financial and other support if they are to survive in the expected economic downturn, and those were certainly worrying figures that the Minister shared with us today. For example, small and social enterprises must be supported in their efforts to access public contracts. We should also look at encouraging social value clauses in public procurement to support regional development and those smaller businesses. The 2019 report on rebalancing the economy revealed that only 4% of the North's social enterprises were located in Fermanagh and Tyrone. Given that the social economy has a track record of delivering social value and sustainable jobs, it is important that we see that sector delivering more of those benefits in Fermanagh, Tyrone and all areas west of the Bann.

4.30 pm

We also need to look at some of the other inequalities in the North. We need to look at other areas, but particularly the North. In the North, Women make up 51% of the population, yet only 30% of them are self-employed. Women represent 82% of part-time workers, and 52% of women are unemployed. Women still face gender gaps in pay, higher levels of part-time work and a concentration of employment in lower-paying sectors such as caring, cleaning and hospitality. Rural women are even worse off due to the centralisation of services and opportunities, and, with only 3% of government funding for women's groups going to rural women, they are underserved and neglected.

To build a balanced and sustainable economy, we need to look at the issue of working carers. Strong economies have come to realise the value of supporting carers in their workforce. Germany recently brought in laws to promote the rights of workers to take time off for caring responsibilities and protect their career progression and promotion. We need to look at that sector of our economy.

As the Chair of the Health Committee, I understand the pressures that our health and social care sector faces. As

the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded across our communities, we saw the consequences of 10 years of Tory austerity, with a lack of even the most basic protection equipment available for those front-line workers. Many Members who spoke in the debate referenced that and rightly so.

In the aftermath of the crisis, it is expected that areas of high deprivation across the North will have suffered disproportionately. According to the Office for National Statistics, patterns of death from COVID-19 correspond with patterns of deprivation, with deaths in more deprived communities more than double those in the least deprived. Members, that is a scandal. In the aftermath of the emergency and crisis, we will need to examine that to see how we can prevent that ever occurring again.

Health inequalities in the North need to be addressed. We must urgently address the inequality that causes the life expectancy of a child born in the North in 2017 to be 1-6 years lower than a child born in the South. We must try to understand why suicide rates are three and half times higher in areas of high deprivation and why drug-related and alcohol-specific mortality is four times higher in our more deprived communities. We need to begin to tackle those stark inequalities, not only because they are an injustice in themselves but to build a sustainable economy.

Austerity is not the way forward. It has caused enough unnecessary suffering to so many. Our economic recovery strategy must be one that invests in our public sector and all our communities and all our people.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. I note and accept that he can give a valid opinion on austerity, but I do not accept that it is the sole reason why the health service is in crisis. Does he accept that a previous Minister of Health who sits on his Benches was warned at one point to stock up on personal protective equipment and did not take that advice?

Mr Gildernew: Does the Member accept that, not long ago, in the Chamber, his Minister of Health stated that the health system had been underinvested in for 10 years, which corresponds almost exactly with Tory austerity? That is why we have seen a year-on-year reduction in real-terms spending in that sector. Those issues must be addressed going forward.

Caithfidh ár straitéis eacnamaíochta aghaidh a thabhairt ar an bhochtaineacht agus ar an neamhionannas, go háirithe ar an éagothroime sláinte. Caithfidh infheistíocht san oideachas agus scileanna, i dtithíocht agus i gcruthú fostaíochta bheith mar chuid den straitéis. Our economic recovery strategy must begin to earnestly tackle deprivation and inequality, particularly inequalities in health. The strategy must include investment in health, education and skills, housing and job creation. It is my belief that we need to recognise that many people out there are trying to play against a rigged deck. A few years ago, in a large housing estate in Dungannon, not one child passed the 11-plus. No one in the House can convince me that not a single child in a massive housing estate is intelligent enough. That is about structural oppression and disadvantage in the system, and we need to tackle that to ensure that we have a better way of going forward.

We have heard a lot of talk recently about returning to normality or about the new normal.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Gildernew: We need to start to work together to see how we make and create a better normal. I support the motion and reiterate our support for the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the unprecedented impact the COVID-19 global pandemic is having on our society and economy; commends the invaluable contribution made by our front-line workers who have provided vital service, selflessly, throughout this pandemic; believes that a fair, just and green economic recovery strategy is required in the aftermath of this crisis; agrees that an economic recovery strategy must not only recognise but also demonstrate that we value our front-line workers and want to protect them, and the most vulnerable, through any impending recession; understands that workers' rights and public services must be protected; commits to existing economic challenges being tackled by a just and green transition to a more high-skilled, regionally balanced and sustainable economy that works for workers, their families, and businesses; and calls on the Executive to ensure that these principles underpin an economic and society-wide recovery guided by a social partnership approach involving government, trade unions, businesses and the third sector.

Adjourned at 4.37 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 2 June 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, the next two motions are to approve statutory rules relating to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) regulations. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion and I will then call on the Minister to move it. The Minister will commence the debate on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record and I will call on the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. If that is clear, we will proceed.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Lyons: There are two motions before the Assembly today. With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will address both of them in my remarks. This is the third time that Minister Kearney and I have come before the Assembly in relation to these regulations, which have a wide-reaching impact on almost every corner of our lives. We acknowledge the impact that they are having. As I have said before, this is not only a health crisis but a social and economic crisis as well. I want to thank people for their patience and for the personal sacrifices that they have made; because of their adherence to the rules, along with the work of our health service, we are in a position to bring further relaxations to the Assembly this morning.

I want to turn to the two motions before us today, which are that the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 and the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Members will recall the proceedings on 21 April, when the Assembly considered and approved the original regulations that had been made using emergency provisions in the primary legislation. They had been made and came into operation on 28 March in the knowledge

that Assembly scrutiny would follow. The content of the original regulations is something with which we are all now very familiar. They contain restrictive measures, and the Department of Health has a responsibility, and is required, to keep them under constant review so that they are retained for no longer than is absolutely necessary.

The regulations have built-in protections to ensure that there are frequent and robust reviews of the measures. Regulation 2(2) requires that the restrictions and requirements are reviewed at least once every 21 days, and regulation 2(3) requires that any restrictions or requirements must be terminated as soon as the Department of Health considers that they are no longer necessary to prevent, protect against, control or provide a public health response to the incidence or spread of infection. Those are powerful legislative provisions, and, since 28 March when the regulations were first introduced, they have provided the basis for several reviews conducted by the Executive.

A first review, completed on 15 April, resulted in no changes, but, on 24 April, it was agreed that the requirement to close burial grounds to members of the public should be lifted and that it would also be helpful, when doing so, to clarify the circumstances in which a person may leave the place where they are living to take exercise. At a further review on 7 May, it was decided to continue to maintain all the remaining restrictions and requirements for the time being. On 15 May, the Executive agreed the easing of other restrictions, leading to the amendment regulations that are the subject of today's debate.

We are now in a position where we can begin to carefully relax some of the restrictions. These cautious steps demonstrate how seriously the Executive take the review of the regulations and how they will not hesitate to move decisively when it is the time to do so, based on the criteria that we have set out.

The amendment regulations give effect to a number of important changes. Regulation 4, which deals with restrictions and closures, is amended to include the opening of a place of worship for the purpose of solemnising a marriage ceremony where a party is terminally ill. Members will be aware that that change has allowed Samantha Gamble and Frankie Byrne, a couple from County Down, to recently be married. I am sure that the House will want to send their best wishes to them.

Regulation 4 has also been amended to allow for acts of worship to be broadcast to worshippers who are present in a vehicle parked on the premises, provided that all those attending remain in their vehicle at all times during the

service and that everyone in a vehicle is from the same household.

Mr Allister: Will the junior Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way on that point.

Mr Allister: I have been seeking clarification on that point. The regulation speaks about attending what is, effectively, a drive-in church "on the premises", but nowhere in the regulation is the premises defined. Does that mean that it has to be premises within the curtilage of the church building, or can it be premises that are rented for the purpose, such as a nearby field or public car park? Will he clarify?

Mr Lyons: I do not have that information with me, but I can check it out for the Member. In my view, it makes sense that if the church does not have a big enough car park, and if someone has a field or outdoor area that the church wished to use, that that would be an acceptable alternative. It is common sense. I promise that we will come back to the Member on his point.

Regulation 5 also deals with restrictions on movement. It is amended to include the need to access services provided by a district council or other public body, including household waste or recycling centres, as a reasonable excuse for a person to leave the place where they are living. Regulation 5 is also amended to allow people to undertake outdoor activity.

A new regulation 6A has been added to allow outdoor gatherings of up to six people from different households or any number of members from the same household.

Regulation 7 has been amended to clarify the application of enforcement provisions insofar as children are concerned. Regulation 9 has been amended to allow for the procedure to be used in cases where a district council issues a fixed penalty notice. Finally, parts 2 and 3 of schedule 2 have been amended to allow garden centres and ornamental plant nurseries to open to customers but not to open the cafes or restaurants on such premises.

These amendments mark further small but important steps on the Executive's pathway to recovery. None of us wants the restrictions to remain for one moment longer than necessary. The regulations are key to winning the fight against COVID-19 and key to an effective recovery and to a quick return to more normal ways.

The Executive will continue to keep these regulations under review, using the three essential criteria that we published earlier this month. The first of those is evidence and analysis relating to the pandemic. This will include the latest medical and scientific advice, the estimated level of transmission and the impact that any relaxations might have on the future trajectory of the pandemic. The second is the capacity of health and social care services to deal with coronavirus cases while also returning to the delivery of normal services. The third is assessment of the wider health, societal and economic impacts of the regulations, including the identification of areas where greatest benefit and lowest risk would result from the relaxation.

The regulations have worked and continued to work. They have saved lives and prevented our health system from being overwhelmed. I know that people want us to move more quickly. On a daily basis, I and, I am sure, other Members get dozens of queries asking when x, y and z can be reopened. People want to be indoors with their

families, they want to get their businesses up and running again or, simply but importantly, they want to get their hair cut. That is an issue that is increasingly unimportant for me with each passing year. Our message is simple: if we want to get there, we need to adhere to the rules that are in place now.

The vast majority of people have made sacrifices and have obeyed the rules. That makes it all the more frustrating for them when they see others who are then flouting the rules. In my constituency over the past number of evenings, large crowds have gathered in massive numbers at the beach at Ballygally. I know that this is happening in other places across Northern Ireland. They are disturbing local residents, they are being abusive to others and they are getting into fights. This is unacceptable. Not only are they involved in these sorts of activities but they are leaving litter behind. They could be picking up something else. They could, of course, be picking up the virus.

There have been easements in restrictions. People are free, and rightly so, to do more than they were able to just a few weeks ago. I want people to enjoy outdoor activities and to be able to sit in their gardens with a few friends or to visit garden centres, but the stupid and irresponsible actions of a few have the potential to threaten the progress that we have made, and that is an impact that all of us will then feel. I say to the young people and the others who have been breaking these rules: help us to help you. We want to get back to where we were before, but that is only going to happen if we stick to and obey the rules that are in place. I want us to move through the stages of the Executive's recovery plan so that we can be in a place where we can consign these regulations to the bin. The better we follow them, the sooner that that can happen. I hope that I will be able to come back to the House shortly, bringing in further relaxations, but, in the meantime, I commend these regulations to the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The first person on my speaking list is the Chair of the Executive Office Committee. Before I call him, I remind Members that the Chair of the Executive Office Committee and the Chair of the Health Committee will be given a bit of leeway in that they can maybe ask more than one question, but I again remind Members to try to keep their questions sharp and focused.

10.45 am

A Member: On a point of order.

A Member: On a point of order.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Go on ahead.

Mr Lyons: It is a debate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I beg your pardon. Well done. It is a debate — you are correct — not Question Time. My mistake. It is force of habit now, trying to keep you all moving along. My mistake.

I call the Chair of the Executive Office Committee, who has as much leeway as he likes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The fear that you see is that of someone trying to turn seven pages into a question, which would have been very interesting. *[Laughter.]* I speak on behalf

of the Committee for the Executive Office. The Committee very much welcomes the lifting of restrictions when the time is right. I look forward to hearing from the Chairperson of the Health Committee on the formal deliberations that took place in Committee on the legislation. There is no doubt that the restrictions have come at a cost to our citizens, our economy and, indeed, the lives that we once led. That is why any lifting of the restrictions is so eagerly welcomed. It would be very foolish, however, for anyone to think that the lifting of restrictions is happening because the virus has diminished in any way. The reason that the regulations can be amended is largely down to the impact that social distancing is having on the transmission rate of the virus, and that is because of the sacrifices that people are making.

I know that other considerations come into play, such as the impact on wider society and the economy, but social distancing remains key. I do not want to go into the detail of the restrictions that have been lifted. That has already been covered. I do, however, want to take the opportunity to urge everyone to continue to be patient and to show discipline. We have seen in recent weeks evidence of more people out on the streets and roads. If their doing so is within the guidelines, that is fine, but if it is not, it is far from fine. We need to keep the R rate below one, and we can do that only if people remain compliant. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Executive for their continued diligence in these new and difficult times and for the measured responses that we have seen to ever-changing circumstances.

I will now make the following remarks in my capacity as an SDLP MLA. I welcome the further relaxation of the regulations. It is, I suppose, an indication that we are challenging the pandemic, and that has been possible only because of the immense sacrifice that many in our community have made, not least those who are shielding and socially isolating at home, forgoing their opportunity to be out and about and to meet up with their loved ones. All of us in the House feel their pain and know what they must be going through. I am sure that everybody will send their support and thanks to them for the sacrifices that they have made.

I continue to note at each stage that new restrictions regulations are laid that I am still unhappy with the democratic process behind them. I know that this is a technicality, but the fact that the regulations are decided on and enforced before agreement of the House is sought continues to feel somewhat back to front. I acknowledge, however, the extreme and difficult times that we are living in and understand that decisions need to be taken quickly.

I acknowledge, and am thankful for, the changes to the regulations that specifically permit acts of worship and marriages where one of the individuals is terminally ill. I welcome those changes and recognise the specific nature of permitting the marriage of people with a terminal diagnosis. That is an incredibly heartfelt and human act, and it was very welcome to see.

In these times, many people have turned to prayer and worship as a way in which to get through the pandemic. Many people, me included, have been able to avail themselves of online services, and that has been welcome. I know, however, that many people prefer to attend chapels, churches and other places of worship physically,

and having that ability returned to them means so much to so many.

The change that allowed the opening of recycling centres is a very welcome move. Many wanted to see it, and I am sure that many Members here were inundated with contact from constituents who were desperate to remove their rubbish from their home and garden and dispose it. I worry, though, that not all councils are acting equally, as some permit only household rubbish and recycling materials. Some councils are not opening their centres to the full range of materials, and, as such, there is still unacceptable amounts of fly-tipping happening in our countryside. Many beautiful locations are being blighted —.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Sure.

Mr O'Dowd: Does the Member accept that recycling centres not being open is not the reason that fly-tipping takes place?

There is absolutely no excuse for fly-tipping. Fly-tipping was taking place before recycling centres had fully opened.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. The point that I am making is that, in my constituency, there has been an increase in fly-tipping, but we have a council that does not have its full recycling capacity open. It only accepts black bag rubbish and is therefore not accepting the large items of rubbish that, all of a sudden, are appearing in increasing amounts in the area. I have no doubt that, if the recycling centre was open for those materials, they would end up there, not down country lanes. It would defy logic to drive past the recycling centre to dump something in the countryside, if you can leave it in the recycling centre.

The point that I was making is that our locations are being blighted by fly-tippers who are unable to access the recycling centres. I do not endorse fly-tipping, but, at the same time, I want to see the councils offering as full a range of recycling as they can. Will the Minister liaise with the councils to see if there are specific reasons why the recycling centres are not open to their full capacity? My understanding is that the majority of them are and only some are not.

The need for a timeline continues to be important. Businesses in our communities are struggling. They need to plan and prepare, and not having even an indicative timeline is tough for them. People are grown-up; they will cope with the fact that a timeline might have to slip. However, at least they will be able to have the preparation done, so that they can cope with a short wait. It is better to have a three-week delay until reopening or re-profiling your business than to be simply given 48 hours notice that you can trade again. I will continue to underscore the importance of a timeline, acknowledging that those timelines may change. This is something that we continue to want to see.

I also worry about the lack of clarity there can sometimes be in communicating the decisions and the changes that have been made. People need to know exactly what the changes mean. I have often said here that, when we relax the regulations, all of a sudden our inboxes increase with questions from people asking what they can and cannot do. For example, six people can meet outdoors:

this may seem like a silly question, but are people's gardens outdoors? In our area, the PSNI do not think so. We have people who can meet outside but are told that their gardens are not outside, so clarity is needed there. Yesterday, we heard about hotels that can reopen, but can their bars and restaurants? Is it just their rooms? If it is just their rooms, how many of their rooms can they open? The questions go on and on. People need to be provided with as much clarity as possible when we relax the rules, so that they know exactly what they can and cannot do.

I suppose that some of that might come. The Minister has mentioned that we have allowed six people to meet outdoors, but now we see large groups of people forgetting that, although you can meet outdoors, you still need to maintain the two-metre distancing. If the relaxation means that you can go to certain locations, it does not mean that you leave your litter behind. However, people feel that there are so many changes and they do not understand or take the time to know the detail of it. I continue to ask for an increase in clarity as the regulations are relaxed.

We are still on a journey with the pandemic. Already, we are discussing the "new norm" rather than returning to the "old norm", and that will be the mantra for some time to come. I appreciate and thank the Executive for the work they are undertaking in these difficult times. I am happy to support the relaxation of the regulations as detailed.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): The Health Committee was briefed on the two statutory rules by the Chief Environmental Officer on 28 May. The Committee agreed that it was content for the small easements to restrictions to be made, but a number of issues were raised.

The first was about the evidence and tracking that go into decision making about when we ease restrictions. We are advised that a process has been agreed across the Executive and that Departments proposing a change are required to fill in a template setting out a rationale, provide any evidence available and complete a risk matrix. It was explained that, once that is received, the Department of Health scrutinises it from the point of view of public health, drawing on the expertise of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. The Department then produces a paper advising the Executive of its view on whether the change can be made. We were also advised that, typically, there is a three-week period before the impact of changes to restrictions can be seen.

The second issue raised was the strategies to engage with harder-to-reach communities, such as those whose first language is not English or those with communication difficulties. We were informed that each Department is responsible for stakeholder engagement in its field of responsibility. The Committee has raised the point on a number of occasions, and there may be more to do in that regard to ensure, for example, that some of our large migrant communities are fully informed of the up-to-date rules and requirements to keep them and their families safe.

We also asked about the definition of "outdoor activity" currently permitted. The Chief Environmental Officer advised that any attempt to list activities could be counterproductive, as there would always be activities not on the list that were equally safe. We understand that the key element of this is avoiding shared contact with hard

surfaces but that guidance might be developed and put on nidirect.

Members also enquired about enforcement and were advised that, largely, the PSNI is looking after public gatherings while councils are now an additional enforcement body and are likely to lead on engagement with business. We were advised that, to promote a consistent approach, a subgroup of Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and environmental health officers had produced internal guidance for enforcement officers and was sharing experience of recent queries.

In closing my remarks on behalf of the Health Committee, I will say that, while the Committee supports these small steps towards easing restrictions, members expressed concerns about more people on the streets and groups socialising without necessarily observing social distancing. The Committee recognises the ongoing danger of the current situation and the risk of complacency. We urge people to keep to the rules and to maintain social distancing.

Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal eile a rá. I would like to say a few more words in my role as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. I agree with all the remarks that we have heard. We have all seen the uplift in activity and the decrease in social distancing across all age groups and in a range of settings. There are particular concerns. The key element is that the testing and tracing system that is put in place needs to be robust enough to pick up on any increase in community transmission. It also needs to be able to identify the location of that increase, whether geographically or by social group. Then, it must be able to respond in a way that avoids another total lockdown but provides targeted advice to isolate.

My concern about the harder-to-reach communities remains. Given the fast-moving nature of how many of the restrictions are being eased, there is a risk that communities with additional language difficulties will struggle to follow the changes and will be guided by what they see on the streets. That could be harmful to them and damaging in its promotion of a further spread of the disease. Those communities also need additional support to isolate. Often, they live in multiple-occupancy housing and work in shift patterns in settings that are quite congregated. We need to be careful. There is a responsibility on the Department of Health to ensure that the testing and tracing system works and is sufficiently robust to spot any increase.

The cumulative nature of some of the changes will provide an additional challenge to the Department of Health. If it is only after two or three weeks that we can see how each measure translates, the Department will need to be very reactive in saying when something is creating a difficulty or is a potential problem.

Another issue that we need to be very cognisant of at present is travel to the island of Ireland. It is widely recognised and accepted, I think, as a fact that Ireland is a single epidemiological unit. We need to guard against transmission in communities across borders, where transmission is suppressed on one side but continues to rise on the other and we see cross-infection, in that sense. For people coming on to the island, we need robust measures in place to identify where they are isolating. We

need passenger health locator forms to be able to track and trace them on their journey here, and we need good information and good systems at the airports. We also need good data collection to identify where any hotspots are arising.

I encourage the Executive and the Department to continue their engagement and to continue to watch carefully what happens over this time.

I plead with the public to be aware that these measures are being taken in a very gradual and phased way, in order to test the water to see what is happening. Please do not take them as a signal to go back to the old ways. The measures that are keeping this under control are social distancing and the lockdown. We need to maintain all those elements to ensure the safety of our people.

11.00 am

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the news that coronavirus deaths are now at extremely low levels, new positive tests are also at low levels and contact tracing is being managed. Obviously, any death from the virus is one too many, and I commend the vast majority of the public who have adhered to the physical-distancing measures, in particular and, of course, our incredible health service for helping us to reach this point.

I must take this opportunity to say how dismayed I am to hear of gatherings at beauty spots in recent days. I say to those who are behaving in this way: stop. You, and you alone, will have an impact on how we go forward, and these actions will delay and prevent the easing of the restrictions. Whilst the majority of people are acting responsibly, patiently waiting to be able to do the simple things, such as hugging their grandchildren and loved ones, I appeal to those who are flouting the rules and misbehaving to act responsibly in order that we can all move on.

Lockdown has been a testing time for everyone, most particularly those affected by the disease, but now that we are, hopefully, past the worst, attention must increasingly be given to the wider health, economic and social price —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mrs Cameron, I am sorry to interrupt your speech. Could you move to the wee mike? It is just that the broadcasting system may not be able to pick up your comments, and they may not then be able to be reported in Hansard. You have wee a lectern there as well now so that is grand.

Mrs Cameron: Thank you Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Do want me to begin again?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the news that coronavirus deaths are now at extremely low levels, new positive tests are also at a low levels and contact tracing is being managed. Obviously, any death from the virus is one too many, and I commend the vast majority of the public who have adhered to the physical-distancing measures, in particular and, of course, our incredible health service for helping us to reach this point.

I must take the opportunity to say how dismayed I am to hear of gatherings at beauty spots, in particular. I say to those who are behaving in this way: stop. You alone will delay the easing of the restrictions by acting in this

manner. The majority of people are acting responsibly, patiently waiting to be able to do the simple things, such as hugging their grandchildren and loved ones. I call on people to act in an appropriate manner.

Lockdown has been a testing time for everyone, most particularly those affected by the disease, but now that we are, hopefully, past the worst, attention must increasingly be given to the wider health, economic and social price that is being paid by our entire population. We need to be as thorough and as swift in taking measures to protect our community from the havoc and hardship that long-term lockdown will produce as we were in protecting them from the disease.

We must look at the urgent reopening of our health service to those in need of other care. Cancer waiting lists are growing, people are not being given diagnostic procedures as quickly as they need them and hospital wards are lying empty while those who need care are staying at home. It is all too concerning that, if this is not addressed urgently, many people will, unfortunately, die of non-COVID-related conditions.

We must also look at the whole sphere of mental health. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that more people will die by suicide next week than from COVID-19. What a challenge that poses for us. Will we take that as seriously as we took COVID-19? We also need to consider what measures can be taken to reduce public fear, so that life can resume in a manner as close to normal as possible. The impact of that fear on mental health cannot be underestimated, as well as the impact it has on the economy, which we need people to reinvestigate.

It is essential that the economy is reawakened as soon as safely possible. Many reports are questioning the effectiveness of lockdown, but the Executive acted appropriately, faced with that threat. However, more strategic social-distancing measures could equally effectively move us forward in protecting public health.

Of course, we look forward to being kept advised by scientists on all those issues, going forward.

If the vast majority of people will have only a minor illness, it is difficult to justify a closed society. We understand that under-65s with no underlying conditions or obesity are reasonably safe. We have the data to demonstrate that. We need to find ways to ensure that all who can return to work safely do so as soon as possible. I welcome the fact that COVID-19 assessments are being carried out for all workplaces and that protective measures are being put in place before those openings. I welcome the announcement of the opening of tourism facilities in July and thank my colleague Diane Dodds for that. I welcome the current low infection rate and trust that we will assess continually whether it is necessary to postpone the opening of hotels and, more particularly, caravan parks and self-catering accommodation for another seven weeks. Can we look at new measures in those places to protect health but allow people to use those facilities?

The UK Government message to “Stay alert” was derided by some, but, by being alert, we follow the advice. We do not touch our mouth, nose, ears or eyes. We wash our hands. We cover our mouth. In order to ramp up the health service and get back to some degree of normality, we must be alert. We cannot live in lockdown for ever. Balance must be found. I support both motions.

Mr Sheehan: The remarks that I will make relate to the regulations that have been introduced. Of course, we have seen the opening up of places of worship for marriages where one party is terminally ill; the opening of recycling centres and garden centres; the opening of churches for private worship and what have been commonly referred to as “drive-in ceremonies”; and other outdoor activities and gatherings subject to certain restrictions. Other relaxations will also take place, including for drive-in cinemas and concerts, although those are not covered by today’s motions. Of course, yesterday, we heard the announcement of a date for the potential opening of hotels, caravan parks and so on next month. All that is welcome. Most people welcome the relaxation. It has been a tough eight or 10 weeks; I am not sure exactly how long it has been since we moved into the lockdown.

I must say, however, that we are moving into a dangerous period. There is a perception in some quarters that the danger has passed, that the trajectory is one way and one way only and that we are moving completely out of lockdown. We heard the junior Minister talking about crowds of young people on Ballygally beach. This morning, I heard Andrew Muir on Radio Ulster describing similar scenes in Crawfordsburn and Helen’s Bay. That type of behaviour, particularly among young people, has been replicated in areas across the North. I suppose that, if we were all young lads and young girls again, we would want to be out enjoying ourselves. That is a given. However, we know the difficult circumstances in which we live at the minute.

The messaging has not been helped. Regardless of the distance between here and our neighbouring island, we are all very much aware of what has happened over there. The publicity around Mr Cummings and so on over the past number of weeks helps only to muddy the water. People do not get a clear indication of what the actual message is or feel that there are laws for some people and different laws for others. Of course, the British Government have themselves been responsible for a lot of that mixed messaging. From the outset of the pandemic, their positioning has been pretty shambolic. Over the past number of days, we have seen scenes of beaches across the water that have been packed like Benidorm in August. People have been packed in like sardines. That is not the message that needs to go out.

We need to be clear that the regulations that we are discussing today are part of a slow easing of the restrictions. Further easing of restrictions can take place only when we have a proper system for testing, tracing and isolating. You see, a complete lockdown is not a necessity. It might have been initially here and in other countries that were not prepared for the pandemic. However, some countries, particularly those in Asia that had experience of SARS, MERS, swine flu, avian flu and so on, were prepared. They were ready for testing, they were ready for tracing, and they had robust systems in place to do all that. For example, South Korea, which has a population of 55 million, has seen fewer than 300 deaths. There has not been one death in a care home in South Korea, despite the fact that it is only a two-hour flight from Wuhan, where the virus is alleged to have originated.

Where there have been localised outbreaks or clusters, those countries have been able to move in and initiate a localised lockdown. If we had that system here, we could do the same. The difficulty for all of us and for society

in general is that there is no sign that the virus will just evaporate and disappear into thin air. It is here for the foreseeable future and probably until such times as we get a vaccine. Therefore, we must have the proper strategy in place to deal with further outbreaks. The messaging from the Executive must be crystal clear.

I welcome the regulations and the easing of the restrictions, but that must all be part of an overall strategy of testing, tracing and isolating the virus.

Mr Chambers: I support the relaxations, provided that they continue to be based purely on medical and scientific advice. That is important. Indeed, all the measured relaxations planned must always be based on such advice.

As the Minister said in his opening remarks, I am sure that we have all had many phone calls to the effect that, once one little bit of relaxation has been given to one sector, all the other sectors are on the phone or emailing us to say, “Well, if they can do that, why can we not do this?”. It is difficult sometimes to answer those questions.

As the Chair of the Health Committee said, we had a presentation last Thursday from the chief environmental health officer in the Department of Health. I asked him about travel to garden centres: if my nearest garden centre was four miles down the road but I decided to drive past it and go 10 miles down the road because I preferred the garden centre there, would I be breaking the regulations? Indeed, would I be in breach of the regulations if I drove 50 miles to Enniskillen to a garden centre that I particularly liked? Of course, the answer was no. The distance that you travel to a garden centre is not in breach of the regulations. I would have thought that the regulations would have contained some sort of caveat restricting the distances that you can travel to somewhere like a garden centre. I assume that the Republic of Ireland still has the five-kilometre limit on travel. I would have liked to see something like that here, as it has created a wee bit of a contradiction. A few weeks ago, the PSNI was stopping and questioning people about travelling to take exercise.

People who could not justify the distance that they were travelling to exercise were either being turned back or, in some cases, given a fixed penalty ticket. There is that sort of contradiction that, at that point, the distance of travel seemed to be very important, but now, as we see, relaxation is coming in the legislation. The legislation has not changed; it is just that these relaxations have come. Travel seems to be absolutely unlimited.

11.15 am

The other question that I put to the environmental officer on Thursday was about who is now going to police the regulations with the opening of stores and businesses. As we have seen over recent days, a lot of big stores have been reopening. I asked him whether the police were still the go-to agency, but he said no and that the power had been vested in local authorities to control and police any alleged breaches and so forth of the legislation as it stood. My supplementary question was this: how can we guarantee consistency?

It is very important that, whenever we do anything, we are consistent. That is what the public are looking for. They are looking for clarity and certainty, and unless you give them that, you are handing the ammunition to the army of barrack-room lawyers that has been created over recent

weeks and that nitpicks at the regulations. The answer was that the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) had set up a subgroup of public health representatives who would meet and agree consistent approaches on how they would deal with various situations. It was just last Thursday that that message was given to me at the Health Committee and put on the public record. The next day, you could have picked up a newspaper and read that a Northern Ireland local authority has decided to go on a solo run on estate agents being able to facilitate viewings of vacant properties. That is the sort of inconsistency that I was maybe trying to highlight in that in one council area an estate agent can carry out viewings of empty properties but across the county line, as it were, another estate agent cannot. That creates a sense of injustice among people in the same sector and the feeling that we do not have a level playing field.

In relation to all these pre-announced openings, we have to understand — other Members alluded to this — that they are not a given. A date has been given for them, but that is not written on tablets of stone. Those openings are absolutely subject to the R figure remaining below the magic number of 1, and the only way that that number will stay under 1 is if every member of the community continues to adhere to and cooperate with the advice from the Executive, the authorities and the Department of Health. The best advice is still this: stay at home. We have to hold the line, and the opening of hotels and everything else in the middle of July will not happen if we let our guard down. We all have a responsibility to continue to hold the line.

In conclusion, I admire the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office's blind faith that fly tippers will go to recycling centres if and when they are open.

Mr Catney: I also support the motions. We are all out in order to try to protect as best we possibly can the people here in Northern Ireland — our constituents.

I want to speak for a moment about Lagan Valley. Normality will come back, but the week that is in it is volunteers' week. It is child safety week and volunteers' week. Where would we be without our wonderful volunteers, who have stepped up to the plate and helped as much as they can to alleviate as much of the pain as possible? From 1 June to 7 June, I ask everyone to think about child safety and our volunteers.

Little bits of normality are creeping back in, and that brings normality. These regulations are a step down. I have heard it said that they are baby steps, and they are, but they are baby steps with a vision. As we go into our parks and walk around, with social distancing being practised, we can see vendors coming out. There is ice cream there as we take our little children or grandchildren, if we can, in order to regulate, as best we possibly can, all that social distancing.

I have heard people talking about litter. There was a statistic about Lagan Valley that I found shocking. On one day — a good, sunny day — there could be five tons of litter left in our parks. On one day last week, 10 tons was collected by the council and brought to landfill. I plead with people — and the majority of people already do this — to bring their litter home with them, because our beauty spots are for all of us. They belong to all of us. There are regulations about not travelling to them, and I ask people not to break any of those regulations, but also to tidy up after themselves.

To conclude, I think there is a possibility that our shops may open by 8 June — again, with social distancing. We as an Executive should send out a message, and whatever help we possibly can, to our councils to see that those shops are ready to try and get back open. Another small move is around street vendors who are coming back and maybe selling food. That creates an atmosphere of trying to come back and get normality back together. However, let us not forget, folks, our businesses that cannot open. We have plenty of businesses that cannot open, and we know them. Our offices are inundated by queries from them. However, with these small steps, if everyone sticks with them and goes along with them, then maybe, just maybe, we can come out of this to a much better new normal and a much better and stronger society. I am asking everyone to stick to the rules and follow them as closely as possible as the relaxation comes in.

Ms Bradshaw: I support these amending regulations and put on record again that, as a member of a liberal party, I do so with some discomfort. Even when amended, the regulations will continue to place restrictions on civil liberties and social contact which, at any time other than an extreme public health emergency, would rightly be seen as intolerable.

It is welcome that we reached the stage last month where we could begin to ease restrictions and move out of lockdown. The impact of lockdown on economic well-being and livelihoods has of course been horrendous, but the impact on mental well-being and health has certainly been even greater. It is simply not natural for people to go without any contact with others, and that could not be allowed to continue any longer than necessary.

It is unquestionably a good thing, therefore, that the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (NI) 2020 enable the coming together of six people outdoors with distancing — a safe way to restart contact. It does leave open, however, the serious concerns of people who have received shielding letters or who otherwise regard themselves as shielding, whether because they are caring for someone who has received one or because they believe themselves to be in a vulnerable category and feel that the effects of the virus are too great a risk.

Although there was an announcement yesterday by the First Minister, and the Chief Scientific Officer also commented on shielding, the position has not been made totally clear. Those who are formally shielding remain instructed to stay home, seemingly indefinitely. It is also unclear whether people who are potentially vulnerable because of their condition or age feel free to meet outdoors. It may not be for these regulations to clarify that — rather, for public information and guidance — but it should be clarified urgently, and those who are expecting their shielding letters should receive such clarity with the utmost urgency.

It is also welcome that we can see, at least to some extent, how the raising of the restrictions is in line with the scientific advice that the Executive are receiving. There will be a diversity of opinions among scientists, just as there is among any group of people. The issues are complex, but we can see that good practice is being followed in the regulations and the guidance in prioritising outdoor meetings and avoiding, as far as possible, the three Cs, namely crowds, contact and closed spaces.

The question now is how we allow greater public freedom while also ensuring, as far as possible, that there are no further major outbreaks or spikes. Clearly, the much-discussed R number has a role in determining that, but there is also a range of other considerations, including the very latest evidence of how the virus has spread, who is most likely to spread it, and where it is most likely to spread fastest. We need to combine that evidence with ensuring that our contact-tracing system is able and competent to keep up with any new cases as we try to move the confirmed daily number of cases down towards zero.

That brings me to a major concern. Lockdown has not just seen us locked down in our homes — the health and social care sector has been locked down as well. Cancer screenings have stopped, diabetic clinics are delayed, and vital diagnostics, operations and treatments have been postponed. While we can understand that COVID-19 was all-encompassing, the question now is how are we going to see the reopening of health and social care, and also move on with its urgent transformation? People do not, as yet, appear to know the answer to that. Over two weeks ago, the Health Minister, in response to a question I asked, told me that we would receive his comprehensive recovery plan last Thursday. However, as yet we have not seen it, we do not know what is in it and, certainly as far as I can make out, health professionals have not been engaged in it.

I close by thanking the public for their consideration during these difficult few months. Never was there a time when respect, kindness and patience were more important than now. Some people will initially feel that they feel safer staying at home and will not make use of the freedoms that are being put back in place. Others will genuinely feel that they have been too restricted in what they were permitted to do and where they were permitted to go.

In one way or another, everyone is struggling with this: the decision makers, the people providing vital care, people sadly grieving the loss of loved ones, those who do not feel safe at home and those who simply feel that they deserve a holiday.

I appeal to Ministers and the authorities to ensure that communication of key messages and information remains clear, and it is for all of us to show respect, kindness and patience throughout.

Ms Bailey: The Green Party welcomed the easing of lockdown measures. We are very thankful to the Executive for taking things slowly and doing them at our own pace in a way that is suitable for the people of Northern Ireland. However, we also feel that, for the most part, people at the minute are deciding for themselves that lockdown is over. We can see that on our streets and in our public spaces.

As I am sure is the case with every other Member, every time a restriction is lifted I am inundated with people and businesses seeking clarity. While today we are yet again passing retrospective changes in statutory rules, yesterday other restrictions were announced, leaving exactly the same questions. I know that the Economy Minister has produced priority sector guidance, which is a list published for advisory purposes to allow companies to make their own decisions, yet when lockdown legislation was imposed we did not allow anyone to make their own decisions. We asked for their acceptance and their adherence, so why is a different approach being taken to the relaxation? As Mr Chambers rightly said, people do need clarity

and consistency. At the minute we do not have that, and ambiguity is encouraging people to interpret the changes to meet their own ends.

Who is responsible for ensuring that the public health measures are followed in places where relaxation is allowed? While we see some people wearing masks and gloves, not all are. Is there clarity on that? While people can be seen adhering to social distancing in queues outside outlets, the same is not true when you are on the inside, for example, even if they are wearing protective gloves and masks. They are handling goods on shelves and leaving them there. That puts staff and others at risk. Who bears that responsibility?

I was told of one incident where a physical fight broke out in a car park between two parties, who then made up, shook hands and returned to their socially distanced places in the queue before leaving with a watering can.

11.30 am

Some shops allow only one person at a time to enter premises, while others allow groups to go in together. Some places disinfect equipment between shoppers but others do not. Where is the clarity on that? Some have one-way systems, whether they are adhered to or not, but others do not. To answer these queries with, "Report them to the police, the HSC or local authorities" is inadequate. We need to give people and businesses very clear instruction as we continue to lift the lockdown.

Can all staff, regardless of any underlying medical conditions, including mental health issues, that they or those whom they live with may have be forced back into work as we relax these measures? Let us not ignore the fact that most of these workers are in the caring, retail and hospitality sectors, which are historically low paid and with few contractual protections — even if we do clap for them on a Thursday.

How can we continue to ask people to adhere to rules when the rules are so unclear? When the lockdown was imposed, the virus was not as prevalent as it is today. So while the R number has fallen below one, and that is a very good thing and due to all the efforts that have been put in, we know that transmission is happening, yet responsibility for safety is still very unclear.

I ask that the further lifting of any restrictions starts with very clear messages and responsibilities — please — because COVID-19 has not gone away, and we are all very aware of that.

Mr Allister: The very modest steps involved in the further easement are a demonstration that we are undoubtedly moving at the pace of the slowest, and that, of course, is one of the blights of the system of government that we have. There is much talk, understandably, about the gathering of young people and others on beaches and at other places, and, yet, the point that that demonstrates is the inadequacy of the regulations in the first place.

Even though, across the world, the common denominator of fighting COVID-19 is social distancing, this Executive managed to produce regulations that do not in law require social distancing. There is no provision in these regulations that says that parties must stay 2 metres apart. Yes, it is in guidance, but it is not in the regulations. Although there is now much lamenting about the breaching

of social distancing, part of the cause of that and the lack of ready remedy for that lies in the fact that this Executive brought forth regulations from which that was absent.

Even though we have had two or three changes to the regulations, we still have not put that into the regulations. Of course, that means that when the PSNI are called to Ballyholme beach or Portrush or wherever, yes, they can seek to enforce groups of only six, but they can do nothing under the law about people standing shoulder to shoulder and not social distancing. That is a failure of the Executive's regulations — a continuing failure that has not been addressed. So, before we all get on our high horse about people daring to do this and that, we should look at the regulations that were drafted and recognise that they are deficient in regard to social distancing. Maybe the Executive would be better occupied remedying that before anything else is said about those who do not social distance.

Of course, social distancing is the greatest antidote to the spread of COVID-19, and, yes, it is necessary, but it is equally necessary that it be in the regulations, yet it is not. Why not? Still, why not? That is an issue.

Then, of course, when you have people gathering, as they do, the public nuisance is compounded in many cases by the fact that public toilets are closed. I am glad that the council area in which I live — Mid and East Antrim Borough Council — has, necessarily, opened many public toilets because if people are going to gather at places, where is the logic in adding to health problems by not having public toilets? That needs to be addressed.

Coming to regulations 2 and 3, which we are debating, one of them, humanely, introduces marriage in church for the terminally ill. That is necessary, sensible and right, but then the same Executive allow only fair-weather marriages for others. So, here we have a situation where a family, limited in numbers, can have a funeral service in a church, a terminally ill party to a marrying couple can have a service in a church, but some other couple that want to get married have to do it outside and hope for a good day. Where is the logic in that? If churches are suitable for small funerals and small marriages involving the terminally ill, why are they not suitable for small marriages across the board? When we last debated these regulations, I said that it was key to them ever securing the traction that they would hold that they have an inherent common sense and cogency within them. It is the lack of that, I fear, that is undermining the regulations as much as anything else.

The third regulation introduces matters such as drive-in services. In this debate I have already asked the junior Minister about that, and I was disappointed that he was not able to answer me because it is a question that I have tabled to his office. It is an important question for those in the Church fraternity. The amendment amends regulation 4(6), which begins:

“A place of worship may be used— “

and then it lists —

“(a) for funerals,

(b) to broadcast an act of worship ... or

(c) to provide essential voluntary services ... “

We are going to add to that:

“to broadcast (by way of loudspeaker or radio) an act of worship to worshippers who are present in a vehicle parked on the premises”.

Given that the regulation is premised with:

“A place of worship may be used— “

and then we add to that one of the uses being —

“to broadcast (by way of loudspeaker or radio) an act of worship to worshippers who are present in a vehicle parked on the premises”

does that allow the necessity of drive-in services other than at the church premises? I fear that it may not, and yet, it should.

I say to the Executive Office that it needs to look at that again because there are many churches that do not have a large car park or a huge curtilage, and which therefore could not hold a drive-in service where the cars all park up and listen because they simply have not got the accommodation. However, they might be able to hire a public car park or utilise a nearby field, but do the regulations allow that? That is the question that I am asking. I think that people are entitled to an answer to that, because if a place of worship is the premises and if a place of worship denotes a static premises, then, as these are drafted, it seems that they would not allow the flexibility that is clearly needed. I trust that that will be examined further.

Amongst the other things done by this change is, of course, travel for an outdoor activity, and that is good. However, there are, on the foot of that, some inequities, because that led, for example, to the opening of golf clubs. I never quite understood why golf courses were ever closed, but there you are. The iniquity comes from the fact that golf clubs seem to be operating on the basis that they are open only for members. There are many in our society, particularly amongst the lower-paid, who like to play golf but they cannot afford the golf club fees so they turn up on a pay-as-you-go basis. However, they are not permitted. Why? If it is safe, as it patently is, to play golf outdoors where you can socially distance and it is safe for members, why is it not safe for non-members? Again, it is inconsistencies like that that bring the regulations into disrepute.

Then we have the issue — I raised it in the previous debate — of caravan parks. We are now told that, from 20 July, hotels can open, but they may not be able to serve breakfast and dinner. However, you can make a booking blind as to whether any of those things will operate. Likewise, we are told that caravan parks will open. Those are both premised on the fact that those are outsiders, or third parties, who are coming to use premises such as a hotel or a caravan, which they might rent for a week, a fortnight or whatever. However, that takes no account of the owner-occupied caravans and of the person who owns their own caravan or their own holiday home, and, here, I declare an interest. That takes no account of why, if it is the case, they should be banished from using their caravan, holiday home or apartment until 20 July. If someone goes to their holiday home this weekend and behaves as they would behave at home, sitting in their garden and going for their walk, what is the difference?

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

11.45 am

Mr McGrath: I have been contacted by people who are shielding at home in one room because other family members are using the living rooms and kitchens, and they are moving inside and outside. Those people are in rooms, yet they have caravans or second homes in which they would have the run of the entire space on their own. Those homes and caravans might have small gardens that they could go out and tend to, and it would be much better for their health rather than subjecting them to lockdown in a room. I have written to the Department and asked for a relaxation on that basis. Does the Member agree that that would be worthwhile?

Mr Allister: Absolutely. I received an email this week that would have brought tears to your eyes about a lady who had gone to her caravan for that very reason and yet was then expelled from her caravan and sent back home to a situation where she could not move out of her room.

When government makes provision that creates that sort of inequitable and uneven stipulation, there is something seriously wrong. So, I say to the Executive: you really have to get a grip on how these regulations are working out in real life. As the Member says, why could someone who owns their caravan not go to it, stay in it, sit outside it, take a walk? My goodness, in a week or two, they will be able to get on a plane and fly to Spain, but they cannot drive 20 miles down the road and stay in their own caravan. Where is the logic of that? It is not there.

This banding together of the whole concept of hotels, B&Bs, caravans, second homes, whatever, and just lumping them all together and treating them all the same is exactly what is creating the unease and the temptation to see these regulations dissipated by disobedience. That, essentially, is the biggest challenge. If the regulations lose public confidence, and there are manifestations of that, they will lose their traction and their hold, and, frankly, at the end of it, who can do much about it, particularly when the most basic provision about social distancing is not even in the regulations?

I welcome the tiny steps taken, but I urge a more cogent advance away from this pace of the slowest and remembering the statutory obligation to retain any one of these regulations for no longer than is necessary. Indeed, we were given to understand when the Executive published their five-step programme that, within Step 1, people would be able not just to meet outside with other family members but to visit in the homes of other family members, yet that step has never been taken. Why was it ever in Step 1 if it was not going to be taken? Why give the false hope and then snatch it away? It is another illustration of how public confidence is being sapped in the process of the regulations.

We are coming close to the end of another debate on these matters, and we are told that everything is linked to the R rate, but we have yet to hear in this debate what the R rate is. Why this secrecy? Why, every time, does the R rate have to be dragged out? Why are we not being told on a daily basis what the R rate is so that, as grown-ups, we can observe it ourselves rather than simply being told from on high that it is not at the level that allows any more movement? So, I ask, and I trust that we will be told in the response to the debate, what precisely is the current R rate? Everything is supposed to be predicated on that, so

let us hear it. Let us see the graph of the R rate from the second that the epidemic started until now. If the number of people in hospital and new cases is significantly down, as it seems to be, is the R rate tracking that? As the R rate tracks that, how do you meet the statutory obligation to hold these regulations in place, since the statutory obligation is to have them no longer than is necessary?

Mr Carroll: There is obviously much in these amendments to the regulations that will bring some comfort, some support even, in what has been a very tough time for so many in our communities. It is also worth pointing out to people who may not follow the workings and running of Stormont that we are voting on this after the fact; after the changes to the regulations have already been implemented. I share some of the concerns raised by my Health Committee colleague, the Chair of the Executive Office Committee, and others about that.

Many of the changes appear uncontroversial. Who could argue against allowing people who are terminally ill to get married in a small ceremony? Hopefully, that will bring some comfort to the people in that situation. However, I am concerned about some of the changes to the regulations, in particular those pertaining to garden centres. I have raised that issue at the Health Committee already, and I do so again today.

My concerns are multifaceted. First, I do not see how a garden centre could be classed as an essential service at this time. I am concerned that companies that are, by all definitions, not garden centres may be flouting or sidestepping these rules to open their doors and potentially put workers at risk. I am also concerned that while, one week, it is garden centres and ornamental plant nurseries — I have to admit that I do not know what an ornamental plant nursery is — the next week, it could be retail shops. We are hearing more and more calls for, and news and announcements about, retail shops opening very soon. I would be very concerned about that. It is worth commenting that those workers are, by and large, low paid. They are the people who work over bank holidays, Christmas and other holiday periods, and they are the people who seem to be pushed back into work quicker than others.

Generally speaking, I am also concerned that we may be rushing too quickly to ease the tough measures that people have faced. People have faced tough measures, but we are rushing to lift these elements of the lockdown very quickly despite the fact that the R rate is still not low enough; some people say that it could still be close to 1. We are also hearing reports of a potential second wave in the not too distant future, and there is the tragedy that people are, sadly, still passing away from this virus. All those things have to shape any actions that the Executive take. All those factors have to be considered in any amendments to the regulations or easing of the lockdown.

Members have referred to the breaking of the restrictions. It is very concerning that that is happening, but we have to be careful not to lump all young people in as one homogenous block and blame them en masse for all the breaches. Whilst we are against these breaches — they should not be happening — we also have to say that it is no accident that they are happening at a time that the Government are lifting the restrictions, with some seemingly banging the table for a quicker lifting of those restrictions. It is no surprise either that people are

gathering on beaches when a chief adviser can drive up to a castle for a retreat. News stories about these things happening shape people's actions. People feel that it is deeply unfair that somebody who was central to drafting these regulations in Britain can breach them so flagrantly. All those aspects need to be considered.

People are very worried and concerned about the furloughing scheme being reduced. People feel that they are being pushed back into work very quickly, and I think that we have to fight against that and to ensure that people are protected financially if they take measures to stay at home to protect their health and ours.

I will certainly not oppose the regulation changes, but I have made comments that have to be put on the record.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As no other Members have indicated that they wish to speak, I call junior Minister Declan Kearney to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Comhaltaí sin ar fad a chuidigh leis an díospóireacht inniu. Cuirim fáilte roimh a gcuid tuairimí. I thank all the Members who contributed to today's debate, and I welcome all the comments shared with us.

As an Assembly, we are in the fortunate position of continuing to be able to meet and to undertake our scrutiny role, albeit under these necessary arrangements for social distancing. However, as we all know, for many people in our society, this has been an extremely difficult period. That applies especially to those with special needs, our elderly, those who have family in ICU, and, sadly, all those who have lost loved ones during this period. We should all be very proud of the positive way in which our community has responded to the scale of this emergency.

As I said in our previous debate, we faced a situation at the end of March, when these regulations came into effect, where the scientific modelling suggested that a reasonable worst-case scenario may result in 15,000 deaths. However, largely as a result of the regulations, that estimate has been reduced by more than tenfold. That is clear evidence that the regulations are, indeed, working. As all of us have said, many times, in recent months, no Members in the House would ever have thought that such restrictions would be required; nor do we underestimate the significant effect that they have had on our citizens. However, I am certain that the decision taken by the Executive and the Assembly to introduce the regulations without delay, when their need became apparent, has saved many lives.

Níl aon amhras, i mo mheas, go bhfuil saoránaigh beo inniu go díreach mar gheall ar na srianta seo. I am glad to say that we have reached a stage where we have been able to relax some of the very challenging restrictions that our people have been living with. That is thanks, entirely, to the actions and compliance of our citizens. It is right that we acknowledge the part that they have played in saving the lives of their peers.

Is le pobal na Sé Chontae an t-éacht seo, idir óg agus aosta. However, it is also important that we remind people that we are not yet out of the woods. We still depend on everyone to follow the restrictions that remain in place. The Executive's message, therefore, remains the same. We need to stay at home as much as possible, to limit our contact with other people, to keep our distance, if we do in

fact go out, and stay two metres apart. We need to wash our hands well and to maintain that form of essential hygiene. We should work from home if we can. Crucially, do not leave home if you or anyone in your household has symptoms. Those measures are still critical in our efforts to save lives, and we need to keep repeating them as a reminder of their importance to us all. However, I assure you of this: we will never become complacent about the restrictions and requirements imposed by these regulations. They must not be allowed to become normalised.

While the statutory requirement is for a review of the measures at least every 21 days, the Executive are committed to reviewing them on a constant basis, and that has been the case. We will not hesitate to make changes when the scientific and expert medical advice allows for that to happen. The 'Executive Approach to Decision-Making' document is our blueprint for the review process. It is an incremental framework for assessing progress contained in the document, and it will aid decision-making in key areas.

It will facilitate more relaxations in the days and weeks ahead, as we ease our way forward on the pathway to recovery, but we need to do so slowly and cautiously.

12.00 noon

Ba mhaith liom léirmheas a dhéanamh anois ar an díospóireacht. I turn to some of the points that Members made during the debate. I will try to touch on most of the key issues but will focus on the issues raised that are specific and relevant to the amendment regulations at the centre of the debate.

Our debate began with a contribution from Colin McGrath as Chair of the TEO Committee. He highlighted the cost of the regulations to us all. He pointed out that the relaxations depended on social distancing being maintained and appealed for ongoing compliance. He then, as a representative of the SDLP, expressed concern at the democratic deficit that we are living with in the management of our regulations. He welcomed the lifting of the recent restrictions and noted and expanded on the issue of fly-tipping. I will add to the Member's point, because some of the fly-tipping that we see is not incidental or related to a lack of access to recycling centres; in some instances, fly-tipping takes place as a result of criminal enterprise. That needs to be stamped out, and those responsible need to be brought before our courts. He asked if we could liaise with councils regarding recycling, which is a point that I take on board. Last weekend, I could not access my local recycling centre, so I travelled five miles to access one in a more urbanised area. There are valid points being raised, and the circumstances change from council to council. On the call for a timeline, I understand the call that he made for increased certainty. The Executive's position remains that the approach must reflect the evidence, not arbitrary and artificial timescales. However, I take the Member's point about giving notice and time to prepare, and we will endeavour to give as much notice as possible in relation to other changes.

Colm Gildernew spoke next as Chair of the Health Committee. He reported concerns expressed in Committee about the matrix that is being used to measure the spread of the virus. He spoke of the need to engage with those in our society who have language or

communication difficulties, particularly those in our migrant population. That was a view expressed in the Committee, and, as a representative of Sinn Féin, he repeated that point. He made the point that the Committee had recorded ongoing and incremental breakdown in compliance. As a member of Sinn Féin, he repeated the call for access for and engagement with our migrant population and stressed the need for much more robust testing and tracing. Notably, he highlighted the importance of ensuring that there was good recording of all details at points of entry to the island, North and South, for all visitors. He emphasised his view that there was a need for greater all-island coordination on how all these matters are dealt with.

Pam Cameron spoke next, expressing her dismay at the gatherings at our beauty spots and the dangers that that poses of community transmission. She appealed for ongoing compliance in wider society. She pointed out the urgency of reopening our wider health and social care services and made particular reference to her concerns about mental health services and access to them. I fully agree with that and, indeed, would go further: when we eventually leave lockdown, we will face a legacy of mental illness and mental care issues and, arguably — the Member and I have worked on the issue — domestic abuse challenges arising as a result of incrementally moving back into the new normal. That is something that we must all be vigilant about.

Pat Sheehan expressed alarm at a growing perception that the danger had, in fact, passed. That is a telling and valid observation, particularly as it chimes with the remarks of other Members about not just the perception but the reality that society is increasingly becoming relaxed. He commented on the need for much more coherent messaging in order to lock in the type of compliance that we still need. He said that that needed to be linked to robust public health strategies, pointing out that the easing of restrictions on an ongoing basis, which he welcomed, must be central and integral to an overall and effective wider strategy.

Alan Chambers expressed a personal preference for travel restrictions to be imposed and asked who would police those restrictions. He helpfully reaffirmed that the preannounced possibility of lifting restrictions depended on the R number and was emphatic that we needed to keep our guard up. He also raised a concern about travel to garden centres and other locations and asked whether we felt that a limit on travel would be appropriate. It is the Executive's view that a limit might cause as many problems as it would solve. The key criterion in play here is not the length of the journey; it is, in fact, the conduct and behaviour of those who are travelling. I say to the Member, to echo his point about keeping our guard, that social distancing remains absolutely key at this point in time.

Paula Bradshaw expressed her party's concerns about the potential infringements of civil liberties as a result of our regulations. She observed that there was a need to provide continued clarity to those who were shielding. The advice remains the same to those who are shielding. It is not a matter for the regulations, but I would counsel that those who are shielding need to remain in contact with their general practitioner and need to continue to take the advice that was offered to them in their original shielding letters by their doctors and those responsible for their care. She asked how we could increase social contact

and, in turn, ensure that there were no further outbreaks or increased community transmission. She repeated the need for a plan to reopen health and social care services and asked where that was. I advise the Member that the framework to address the point that she and other Members have raised is in hand with Department of Health officials. Importantly — it was a useful point to finish on to set the standard for all of us — she pointed out that it is important at all stages for respect and kindness as we move through such a challenging time.

Clare Bailey rightly emphasised the need for clarity and guidance on best practice for businesses. Her point was well made. I, too, pay tribute to the excellent work that has been done by the business community, the trade union movement and health and safety colleagues in doing their best to provide us with optimal best practice guidance in the here and now and as we move through the lifting of further restrictions. I agree with the Member that there is more to be done. As each restriction is lifted, we will continue to engage with all the relevant stakeholders in business, the employers, the trade union movement and those with responsibility for health and safety in the workplace to put in place effective guidance.

The second-last contributor to the debate was Jim Allister, who pointed out that, in his view, the regulations were a failure because they were defective in relation to maintaining social distancing. He voiced his view of anomalies concerning the conduct of weddings and expressed a view that outdoor services in turn created an inequity. I will return to his point on drive-in services shortly.

When talking about inequities, the Member raised the issue of access to private golf courses for non-members. That is not a matter for the regulations; it is a matter for those who operate the golf courses. He also made suggestions in relation to hotels, other holiday accommodation and caravans. He was focused in those remarks. Again, those are not matters for the regulations under debate, but they are being considered with respect to the next likely series of amending regulations.

Drive-in church services are permitted only on premises belonging to the place of worship. That restriction remains in place and is required to ensure that there is appropriate control by the person, clergyperson or local church that is responsible for the act of worship that is taking place.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kearney: Let me finish, please, Mr Allister. R factor changes were also highlighted by the Member. The R factor is an incredibly volatile measurement that changes from day to day, but the most recent information that I have received indicated that it was in or around 0.9, which, as Members will know, is moving dangerously towards an R number of 1. When we hit that point or see an escalation of that figure or statistic, we see increased pressure being placed on our hospital and ICU capacity. I say this to the Member: it is important that we remain measured, calm and anchored in relation to our reflections and considerations on all the issues. They are challenging for us all. I agree with him: we do not get it right all of the time, but, equally, we must avoid running with the hares and hunting with the hounds.

Gerry Carroll concluded the debate. He expressed his support for the lifting of the regulations. He is not opposed

to the ongoing process, but I noted his concern in relation to the prospects faced by workers who are on furlough. That is a pressing concern for the Executive, because, as we move through this period, we will hit a point when the furlough arrangements conclude and will have to look carefully at what happens to those workers in that circumstance.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kearney: I am trying to draw the debate to an end.

There will be further, similar debates in the coming weeks and months on how we continue to amend our regulations and lift restrictions, but that will be possible only for as long as we continue to win the battle against COVID-19. Tá ag éirí linn de réir a chéile, ach caithfear an fód a sheasamh. We will not see a full return to all of the normal ways of living in the short term. We will have to learn to live with the virus for an extended period. That means that we will also need to carefully manage the way in which we go about our daily business and save lives.

I understand very, very well that some in our society are frustrated at the pace of progress towards the easing of all our restrictions, but I appeal to them for their continued patience. We have a way to go before COVID-19 has been beaten, so we need your ongoing partnership to continue saving lives.

12.15 pm

Before I finish, I once again pay tribute to all our health and social care workers on the front line, but I also want, in this debate, to extend that solidarity to our firefighters, to our police officers, to our delivery people, to our shop workers, to our farmers, to our waste disposal workers, to our community activists and volunteers and to so many, many others who have led us in the fightback against COVID-19, including those who are on low pay and zero-hours contracts and who endure precarious work whilst providing essential services for our community. To all of them, I say: thank you. Molaim sibh go léir. Míle buíochas daoibh as ucht bhur n-íobairtí. Thank you for everything that you have done, and thank you for everything that you will continue to do in the forthcoming period. We need these regulations. We need them to protect the health service and to protect us all. Molaim na rialacháin agus na leasuithe seo don Tionól. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: This motion has already been debated.

Mr Lyons: I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister, I will give Members a bit of time to find their place or exit their place or to rub down their seats.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the relevant provisions of the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 21 January 2020, relating to the transfer of community orders, youth rehabilitation orders and suspended sentence orders imposed by the courts in England and Wales to Northern Ireland, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

Mrs Long: This Bill will prepare the way for the new sentencing code that the UK Government intend to introduce to consolidate the law on sentencing procedure in England and Wales. The aim of the code is to ensure that the existing sentencing provisions are set out in a more easily understood way and operate more efficiently within a clear framework. To prepare the way for the code, the Bill makes a number of mainly technical changes to existing sentencing law. For example, changing language to avoid inconsistency, correcting errors and updating statutory references such as reflecting the change in Northern Ireland to a single-court jurisdiction. These amendments are a standard measure that often precede a consolidation Bill. Importantly, none of them makes any change to existing offences and penalties or any change to policy.

The Bill will also provide for a clean sweep of sentencing law in England and Wales. The clean sweep is a technical device that has the effect of removing the need, once the code is in place, to refer back to previous layers of sentencing legislation. The courts in England and Wales would have a single point of reference when sentencing offenders. Anyone convicted in England and Wales once the code is enforced would be sentenced under the current law, with there being no need to search through numerous previous statutes. Offenders would be sentenced under the most up-to-date law, regardless of when the offence was committed, subject to certain exceptions to protect an offender's fundamental rights. Those protections will ensure that the offender would not be subject to a greater penalty than was available at the time of the offence.

Everything that is being done in the Bill and the subsequent code is to do with clarifying and simplifying. It is a simplification exercise, and nothing in the way in which sentencing policy operates is being changed. The clean-sweep approach means that there are three minor amendments that deal with a devolution matter, which is why we are here today. The amendments relate to the transfer of community orders between UK jurisdictions. Two amendments change the existing limits of the Northern Ireland courts to alter the terms of community orders and youth rehabilitation orders that have been transferred to Northern Ireland from England and Wales. Currently, when an offender serving a transfer order appears before the court here for a breach or variation, the

court, when re-sentencing, considers the limits on unpaid work or curfew requirements that were available at the time that the offender was first convicted, and, because of the clean-sweep approach, the amendments in the Bill mean that the court would now be able to consider the limits available on the day of re-sentencing. The court would use the law in force on the day on which the offender is being re-sentenced rather than have to check back as to the law in force on the day on which the person was originally sentenced.

The third amendment corrects a technical error made to the Criminal Justice Act 2003 by the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014. It clarifies in law the existing process by which probation officers here refer offenders who have suspended-sentence orders back to courts in Northern Ireland or in England and Wales. There is no change to the process by which that is done. Similar provisions apply to community and suspended-sentence orders on transfer to Scotland from England and Wales. The Scottish Parliament has agreed to their inclusion in the Bill.

I appreciate that the Assembly's preference is to legislate on Northern Ireland matters where possible. Indeed, that would be my preference. However, the amendments are largely technical in nature, and their aim is simply to facilitate the law consolidation in England and Wales.

The Bill is in its final stages in Parliament, and, given the legislative constraints in the current mandate, it would not be possible to bring equivalent provision via an Assembly Bill in the near future. Doing that would prevent the new arrangements from working seamlessly across jurisdictions. Given that everything that is being done in the Bill and the subsequent code is about simplification and clarity, it is preferable to legislate in a single Bill so that users of the eventual legislation can refer to a single Act, rather than to two Acts operating together.

Members will have seen that the Justice Committee's report on the motion endorses that view. For those reasons, I ask that the Assembly support the terms of the legislative consent motion (LCM).

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. At present, I have only four Members on my list. There are more than four in the Chamber, so, if they wish to participate, I ask that Members rise in their place or try to catch my eye.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I intend to be brief, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, given the uncontroversial nature of what is being proposed through the LCM.

The Department wrote to the Committee for Justice in March, advising it of the proposed LCM for the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill. The Minister has outlined some of the detail. The Bill amends legislation to facilitate the enactment and operation of the Law Commission's proposed sentencing code, and that will consolidate the law on sentencing procedure in England and Wales. The code re-enacts existing law and does not alter its substance or effect. The pre-consolidation amendments in the Bill are required for the code to operate as intended and are limited to correcting minor errors or technical changes. Neither the Bill nor the code introduces any new sentencing law.

The majority of the Bill's provisions apply to England and Wales only. There are a small number of provisions concerning transfer of community orders between UK jurisdictions, with three of them extending to Northern Ireland. Those relate to the transfer of community orders, youth rehabilitation orders and suspended-sentence orders to Northern Ireland.

On 30 April, the Committee considered the memorandum laid by the Department on 27 April and agreed that it is content with the proposal to extend provisions in the Sentencing Bill on the transfer of the community orders, youth rehabilitation orders and suspended-sentence orders imposed by courts in England and Wales to Northern Ireland by way of a legislative consent motion. I can confirm that the Committee report set out that the Committee for Justice supports the Minister in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the LCM.

Ms Dillon: As the Chair has outlined, the Committee is supportive of the LCM, as is my party. They are minor technical issues, and it is important that legislation and laws are modernised and are fit for purpose, and, as the Minister outlined, that is what this is about.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. Through conversations with her, I know that the Minister has a focus on this and, more importantly, going forward, she has a focus on sentencing. All the sentencing issues are about rehabilitation and early intervention, and that is where our focus needs to be in the future. I know from conversations with the Minister that that is her focus, and I appreciate that. Thank you.

Mrs D Kelly: I will speak on behalf of the SDLP. I pay tribute to my colleague Sinéad Bradley, who is our justice spokesperson, as she prepared the notes. However, unfortunately, she has to shield at the moment.

The SDLP recognises that a small number of provisions in the Bill relate to the transfer of community orders between the UK jurisdictions and notes the three that extend and apply to Northern Ireland and are currently within the legislative competence of the Assembly. They are: the transfer of community orders to Northern Ireland, the transfer of youth rehabilitation orders to Northern Ireland and the transfer of suspended-sentence orders to Northern Ireland. The SDLP accepts the reasoning offered, which is that although it would be technically possible to legislate for the devolved area through a Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly, these are largely technical amendments that make no policy changes to existing offences and penalties. It is considered preferable to legislate in one Bill so that users of the eventual legislation in this area can refer to a single Act, rather than two Acts operating together.

The proposal is compliant with section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, including EU law and convention rights as defined in the Human Rights Act. The provisions of the Bill that extend to Northern Ireland have no significant financial implication. This enables the SDLP to support the proposal.

Ms Dolan: As has been said, the provisions of the Bill that will be extended to the North deal, largely, with technical changes. It is important to scrutinise these proposals in detail, particularly in the context of our ongoing review of sentencing policy and legislation in the North. My party is content with the provisions of the LCM being

extended. We are committed to ensuring that all aspects of sentencing law and policy are kept modern, up to date and fit for purpose to ensure that we can deal with the root causes of offending behaviour and ensure that there is just punishment, where necessary.

Again, although the provisions in the LCM are minor in nature, the issue of sentencing at large is a key indicator of how we deal with offenders. The provisions included in the LCM deal with the transfer of community orders, youth rehabilitation orders, suspended-sentence orders to the North. More specifically, they address how such orders will be dealt with.

As mentioned earlier, my party is content with the provisions. However, this cannot be looked at in isolation. I would prefer that we ensure that community orders, youth rehabilitation orders and suspended-sentence orders are as effective as possible in the rehabilitation of offenders, with an ethos of problem-solving justice so that courts will not have to deal with breaches of these orders, offenders will not need to be re-sentenced and offending behaviour will not escalate and lead to further offending later on.

Further to this, my party would like more work to be done on early intervention and prevention in order to provide better opportunities for people earlier in life and to steer them away from the type of behaviour that will land them in court where they will be sentenced with these orders. Those are the issues that need to be central to our future approach to sentencing. I support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Question is that the motion standing on the Order Paper [*Interruption.*] I beg your pardon. I should call the Minister to respond and make a winding-up speech. I was too keen. The Minister might have been happier with me if I could get her out the door. [*Laughter.*] I beg your pardon, Minister.

12.30 pm

Mrs Long: You will note that I made no objection. Nevertheless, I will take the opportunity to thank the House for considering the motion and for all the contributions to the debate. I also put on record my thanks to the Justice Committee for its report and to the Executive Committee for its consideration of the issues at hand. I am pleased with the support that colleagues have shown today. That is, I think, recognition that this is a sensible way forward in this case.

I want to touch briefly on the issues around rehabilitation and sentencing. As I have made clear in the past, a sentencing review was completed just recently, and I look forward to engaging further with Members to discuss how we go about sentencing within the Northern Ireland frameworks. I also look forward to discussing further how we develop the pilots for problem-solving justice and problem-solving courts. I, too, am committed to early intervention and rehabilitation. Every contact with the justice system is one contact too many for victims and perpetrators, so, as far as possible, we want people to be deflected away from the justice system. By early intervention we can try to minimise the number of people who become a victim of crime, and we will touch on that again in the coming weeks and months.

I also take the opportunity, if I may, to send my best wishes to Sinéad Bradley and welcome her to the Committee. It is difficult to keep track of all the personnel changes over

recent weeks and months, but I am aware that Sinéad has just taken up her new role. I look forward to working with her and others.

I believe that, on this occasion, the LCM is the appropriate way forward, so I ask for the support of the House in passing the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the relevant provisions of the Sentencing (Pre-Consolidation Amendments) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 21 January 2020, relating to the transfer of community orders, youth rehabilitation orders and suspended sentence orders imposed by the courts in England and Wales to Northern Ireland, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members may take their ease for a few moments before we move on to the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill.

Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees to amendments to Northern Ireland's insolvency and company legislation to assist companies and mutuals in financial difficulties as a result of the coronavirus pandemic being included in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mrs Dodds: The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill was introduced in Parliament on 20 May 2020 by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). The Bill has three main sets of measures to achieve its purpose. First, it will introduce greater flexibility into the insolvency regime to give companies breathing space to explore options for rescue while supplies are protected. Secondly, it will temporarily suspend parts of insolvency law to support directors trading through the emergency without the threat of personal liability and to protect companies from aggressive creditor action. Thirdly, it provides companies and other bodies with temporary easements on procedures for company filing and statutory meetings.

Insolvency and company legislation are devolved matters. However, it has been my Department's policy and practice to maintain both in parity with that made at Westminster. That ensures that companies and insolvency professionals based in both jurisdictions operate to a common rule book, which ensures ease of operation and reduces inefficiency. Mutuals legislation is also devolved, and, while there are some minor differences from GB legislation, my Department and the Treasury have made efforts to progress towards parity where practical. That ensures that mutual organisations working across jurisdictions, such as cooperatives, are not disadvantaged. Taking similar legislation through the Assembly would take many months. As a result, I seek the Assembly's approval for the Westminster Bill to include the same amendments to Northern Ireland's legislation as are being introduced in Great Britain. That will ensure that local businesses can take advantage of the emergency measures at the same time as those in Great Britain.

The Bill, as introduced in Westminster, comprises a total of eight provisions aimed at assisting business. Three, which had already been consulted on, are to be permanent. The other five measures provide for a temporary relaxation of some aspects of insolvency and company legislation.

In summary, the provisions of the Bill are as follows. The first measure, which is intended to be permanent, involves amendments to insolvency legislation. It is to provide a free-standing moratorium to companies. Secondary legislation will follow to extend that to mutual societies. That will give struggling businesses a formal breathing space to explore the feasibility of a rescue or restructuring plan. It creates a 20-day moratorium during which no legal action can be taken against the company by creditors without leave of the court. That period can be further extended with the agreement of the court. During the

moratorium, the company directors will still be in charge, although they will be supervised by a monitor who will be a licensed insolvency practitioner.

The second permanent measure relates to termination clauses in supply contracts. When a company enters an insolvency or restructuring procedure, suppliers will often either stop or threaten to stop supplying the company with essential goods or services. The supply contract normally gives them the right to do that, but it can jeopardise attempts to rescue the business. Provisions in the Bill will mean that suppliers will not be able to jeopardise a rescue in that way.

The third of the measures that are intended to be permanent takes the form of amendments to company legislation and will result in the creation of a new procedure for restructuring. The new procedure will assist companies that, whilst viable, struggle with debt obligations. It will allow courts to sanction a plan that binds all creditors to a restructuring plan, if it is considered fair, equitable and in the interests of creditors. Again, that will be extended to some mutuals by secondary legislation, with modifications to protect their unique position as member-owned and controlled organisations.

The remaining provisions are temporary in nature, and all are time-bound. The first three relate to changes in insolvency legislation. The first relates to the suspension of wrongful trading. At present, a court may order a director to be held personally liable where a company continues trading and the director knew or should have known that the company could not avoid insolvency. The Bill will temporarily remove that threat and, as a result, remove the pressure on directors to close what may be otherwise a viable business. The provision will extend until 30 June 2020 or one month after the Bill comes into force, whichever is later, although it may be extended by secondary legislation if deemed necessary.

The next measure helps struggling businesses by temporarily removing the threat of winding-up proceedings where unpaid debt is due to COVID-19. It also introduces temporary provisions to avoid statutory demands issued against companies during the emergency. The measures will give businesses the opportunity to reach realistic and fair agreements with all creditors. It will also extend until 30 June or one month after the Bill comes into force, whichever is later, and can be extended by secondary legislation, if necessary.

The final insolvency provision will give my Department or the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy with the consent of my Department the power to regulate to make temporary amendments to company or insolvency legislation. That would be done to keep to a minimum the number of businesses forced into an insolvency or restructuring procedure. For example, regulations could be made to change the eligibility conditions for insolvency or restructuring procedures. They could provide for the procedures not to apply or to apply in a modified form in particular cases. Any temporary changes made under the regulations must be removed as soon as the COVID-19 emergency no longer impacts on corporate insolvencies or insolvency procedures. Furthermore, the power will expire in April 2021, although it may be extended, if absolutely necessary, by further legislation.

The final two amendments deal with temporary changes to company legislation. The first deals with annual general

meetings, which are central to good corporate governance. Current social-distancing restrictions do not permit large gatherings. As a result, many companies cannot hold those meetings in accordance with their constitutions.

The measure temporarily allows those companies to extend the period within which the meeting must be held or allow the meeting to be held by other means. That may be via electronic means, so that all participants do not have to be at the same physical location at the same time. Mutuals will also be able to take advantage of similar arrangements, with some minor modifications to reflect the different legislative requirements.

The final measure relates to filing requirements at Companies House. Companies are required to make a number of different filings by fixed deadlines at Companies House each year. Missing the deadline automatically results in a financial penalty. Companies House has already done all that it can under existing law to offer extensions to those deadlines. The Bill allows for further extensions, enabling struggling businesses to focus on the things that matter most while they have reduced resources and restrictions in place.

That is a brief summary of the main provisions of the proposed legislation. We are acutely aware of the significant impact of the pandemic on businesses across the world. In Northern Ireland, many local companies struggle to continue to trade normally as a result of the restrictions put in place to limit the harm caused by COVID-19. The impact of the pandemic is making it difficult for many businesses that are fundamentally viable to continue to trade or meet their legal duties. Therefore, the Bill will provide companies with the support and assistance that will help them to avoid insolvency during this period of economic uncertainty and maximise their chances of survival.

The same package of measures needs to be made available to businesses in Northern Ireland so that they are not placed at a disadvantage. It needs to be put in place at the same time as it is in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is why I seek the Assembly's consent to provisions for Northern Ireland being included in the Bill at Westminster. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

12.45 pm

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I will be as brief as possible. The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill 2019-21 was introduced to the House of Commons and given its First Reading on 20 May 2020. MPs will consider all stages of the Bill tomorrow. The Committee welcomes the basis for the Bill, albeit that Committee members have some issues, which I will detail later.

As the Bill indicates, due to enforced restrictions on movement and gatherings introduced with the aim of curbing the spread of COVID-19, many, otherwise economically viable, businesses are experiencing significant trading difficulties. The Bill aims to ensure that businesses can maximise their chances of survival. It will reform the corporate insolvency regimes here and in Britain introduced on an urgent basis to assist businesses dealing with the effects of the lockdown brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Bill contains temporary measures proposed as a direct result of the pandemic to relieve companies from complying with aspects of insolvency and company law. There is also a package of permanent reforms to the corporate insolvency and governance framework. These measures were consulted on by the British Government in 2016. To summarise, it will not be possible to petition to have companies wound up where the statutory demand was served during a specified period, beginning 1 March 2020. The courts' right to make winding-up orders will be suspended where a company's inability to pay its debts is a consequence of coronavirus. Directors will have immunity from liability for wrongful trading, where deterioration in a company's finances during a specified period is attributable to the virus. Companies get a moratorium free from creditor pressure to assess their best rescue or restructuring. Provisions will ensure that companies have access to the services and supplies that they need if they are being kept open during a moratorium or insolvency procedure.

A new power will allow amendment of corporate insolvency or governance legislation to address problems caused by COVID-19. Proposed amendments to company law will provide a rescue-and-restructuring procedure, as well as measures to ensure that those companies required by law to hold AGMs will be able to do so safely, consistent with the restrictions on movement and gatherings.

Legislation dealing with insolvency in mutuals is a devolved matter, so legislative consent is required here. The Committee welcomes the measures.

The legislative consent memorandum was laid in the Assembly on the 21 May 2020, and the draft motion was contained in the memorandum. The motion itself was laid on the same day, with today, Tuesday 2 June, being set for debate. It will come as no surprise to Members that the Committee for the Economy has not had much time to consider the motion and to take relevant evidence, as per normal procedure. The Committee has done what it can, in the time available, to undertake some small degree of consultation. The Department did not undertake consultation regarding the content of the motion.

The Minister indicated to the Committee that it would take considerably longer to pass an Act of the Assembly to introduce these measures into law here than by using the Westminster Bill and the LCM. The Committee acknowledges that issue and does not wish to see local businesses unable to avail themselves of the same support and relief as that available to struggling companies in Britain. The Committee is very supportive of the fact that the Bill means that credit unions, cooperatives and community-benefit societies will benefit from the same easements that are being proposed for companies as regards meetings.

As I said, the Committee understands the need for measures to support businesses at a time of unprecedented difficulty and is broadly supportive of the Bill and the actions of the Minister for the Economy to allow such measures as are necessary to be put in place via legislation at Westminster on behalf of her Department through an LCM approved by the Assembly.

I wish to reflect briefly on the Committee's consideration of the Bill and the LCM. The Department wrote to Committee members on 21 April 2020 to inform them of the Bill's

introduction in the House of Commons by the British Business Secretary and that the Minister intended to bring forward an LCM to enable amendments to the insolvency legislation to be in the Bill. Prior to the introduction of the Bill and the LCM, the Committee received, at its meeting on 6 May, an oral briefing from officials from the Department's insolvency service who outlined the detail of the Bill as it related to the North.

At its meeting on 13 May 2020, the Committee considered correspondence from the Department, updating it on the expected date of the Bill and its content and informing the Committee that, as a result of the accelerated passage of the Bill through the House of Commons, it would not be possible for the Committee to have the normal period to produce its report. The Committee agreed, at its meeting on 13 May, that, despite the extremely narrow window of opportunity to do so, it would carry out a consultation exercise with stakeholders and wrote to them on 15 May. That brief consultation was based on the information that the Committee had already received from the Department. However, at that point, it did not include the Bill or the legislative consent memorandum.

The Committee received written evidence from the Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) and Enterprise NI (ENI). Members are extremely grateful to them for doing that in a short period. Again, due to the considerable time restrictions, the Committee was unable to take oral evidence on the Bill or the LCM. The ILCU also noted the limited timescale within which consideration of the LCM was undertaken. The organisation had some high-level discussions with the Department on the proposals; however, the body did not have prior sight or knowledge of the detail of the Bill. The ILCU indicated that it is supportive of measures that are seeking to provide flexibility, proportionality and protection for credit unions in how they undertake their activities in the current circumstances and welcomes temporary flexibility for AGMs to allow such meetings to be held by other means even if a credit union's rules do not allow it.

The response particularly highlighted that schedule 14 to the Bill applies to meetings that are held between 26 March 2020 and 30 September 2020. The year end for credit union accounting purposes here is 30 September. The ILCU-affiliated credit unions, under the ILCU standard rules for credit unions, must hold their general meetings within four months of 30 September; ie, by the end of January 2021. Traditionally, most local credit union AGMs are held in November and December. The response notes that under paragraph 2 of schedule 14, an earlier or later date may be substituted by "the appropriate national authority". The ILCU suggests that, as social-distancing measures may well be in place beyond September 2020, the Department should consider making regulations that extend the relevant period to incorporate the normal calendar of credit union AGMs, which take place in the three months after 30 September.

The ILCU expressed concern that holding virtual AGMs will mean increased costs and cybersecurity implications. Additionally, the ILCU highlighted that important issues like declarations of dividends or interest rebates can be approved only via AGM, so voting via electronic means is likely to be an area that credit unions will need to look at as a consequence of the Bill. The ILCU seeks clarity on whether it is the Department's intention that the regulations

will be made should credit unions require additional time to complete their AGMs.

Enterprise NI responded to the Committee without having prior sight of the Bill or LCM. In its response to the Committee, ENI suggested that the period proposed by the Bill to prevent the presentation of winding-up petitions should be extended to cover cases where the statutory demand was served between 1 March and 31 October 2020. ENI believes that protection is required for a longer period for businesses that will inevitably experience COVID-19-related difficulties as government support ends and the costs of reboot and recovery kick in. ENI welcomes the Bill forbidding the courts making a winding-up order where the company's insolvency is due to debts incurred as a result of COVID-19. However, insolvency can occur as the result of a loss of income as well as accrued debt. ENI believes that evidence of lost income as a result of COVID-19 should also be considered when forbidding the court to make a winding-up order. ENI recognises that the businesses must provide reasonable evidence to demonstrate the link to COVID-19 impact and that that needs to be embedded in the Bill to decrease the number of incidents of potential fraud.

ENI suggests that a sunset clause be added covering a suggested period of time when urgency prevails, perhaps 31 December 2020. ENI believes that not time limiting the Secretary of State for business having that power could generate unintended consequences in the future at a time beyond the present crisis.

On the basis of the very limited time that was available to the Committee to scrutinise the LCM and bearing in mind the Minister's view that it is necessary for the legislation to be undertaken by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that local businesses are protected to the same degree as those in Britain and to do so through the Assembly would require a much longer process, the Committee for the Economy agrees to support this legislative consent motion. The Committee asks that the Minister urgently engage with stakeholders, particularly the Irish League of Credit Unions.

I will make some very brief comments in my capacity as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. The impact of COVID-19 on businesses, which has been outlined many times, is huge and very varied in how they operate; therefore, the LCM is welcome. Obviously, we always prefer that devolved matters are dealt with by the Assembly, but as has been said regularly in these times, we are facing unprecedented circumstances, and the ability to make further changes remains devolved. Individuals will also face difficult financial circumstances, and I therefore ask the Minister whether any measures are required on insolvency in that regard.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill. The Bill is designed to ensure that businesses that experience significant trading difficulties throughout the coronavirus epidemic are given adequate opportunity to survive. The measures in the Bill are twofold, with temporary relief measures and more permanent reforms being introduced. The Bill complements the financial support measures of both the UK Government and our Executive, which have been such a lifeline for so many businesses across Northern Ireland. It brings us to level par with GB and will

help to streamline some of the normal requirements that it is just not possible to fulfil while the current restrictions remain in place.

Although the Committee has only had a limited time to consider the LCM, my colleagues and I are happy to support this and believe that it is essential in order to give the same level of protection to local businesses, many of which have been severely affected by the pandemic, and to assist with their rescue, reorganisation and restructuring, whilst also, importantly, safeguarding employment going forward.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. We will return to this item of business at 2.00 pm, when the Minister will conclude and wind up the debate.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56 pm.

2.02 pm

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We return to the legislative consent motion on the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill. I call on the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

Mrs Dodds: I thank Members for their very helpful contributions and support for the motion. I also thank colleagues in the Executive and the Economy Committee for considering the matter in such a timely manner, which has allowed the motion to be debated today.

I want to address briefly some of the points raised by the Chair of the Economy Committee. I thank her for her consideration of those points. She raised an issue around credit unions and the need to extend beyond 30 September the period for annual general meetings. We, of course, will respond to any need to extend that deadline and will do so in a timely matter. I thank her for that indication.

We also have had some thought around extending statutory notifications and winding-up periods because of cash flow difficulties, and we will look at those. Really, the issue is to try to temporarily limit the power of creditors to use their statutory demands in ways that are not in keeping with the Government's call for forbearance for companies during this period.

The Member also raised an important point about the general power to modify insolvency law. I understand that that can cause issues. However, I reassure the House and the Committee Chair that the power will be temporary and will be used only where it is needed to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 emergency on corporate insolvency and insolvency procedures and only where that cannot be achieved by non-legislative means. The power cannot be used to create new criminal offences or to amend existing criminal penalties. The temporary changes of that nature must be removed as soon as the COVID-19 emergency is no longer impacting and will expire in April 2021. I hope that gives the Committee and the House some reassurance on those matters.

I hope that my responses to the debate have helped Members to understand why they should vote for the consent motion. By passing the motion, the Assembly will provide greater opportunities for company survival and better returns for creditors during and after the COVID-19 emergency. The amendments will give business owners more flexibility during the emergency to focus on the things that matter most while they have reduced resources and continued restrictions. Most importantly, the Bill will help companies to improve their chances of survival, protect jobs and support Northern Ireland's economic recovery. I commend the motion to the Assembly and thank Members for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees to amendments to Northern Ireland's insolvency and company legislation to assist companies and mutuals in financial difficulties, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, being included in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Finance to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget (No. 2) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is therefore concluded.

The Speaker took advice on the Bill after Consideration Stage, and, as there were no amendments tabled to the Bill today, the Speaker is content that the Bill may properly proceed to its Final Stage in accordance with the requirements of Standing Orders 39 and section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Finance to move the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 5/17-22] do now pass.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit to the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the Bill.

Mr Murphy: Today's Final Stage debate concludes this unusual step in the financial legislative process for the 2020-21 year. As I explained in the debates that took place last week, this further Vote on Account is an unprecedented step. The circumstances that have been brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic could not have been predicted by anyone when we considered the last Budget Bill earlier in the year. The Executive have acted quickly and decisively to address the emergency as it evolved. In the first few weeks of this financial year, I have announced over £1.2 billion to strengthen the health service, support business and protect the vulnerable. As an Executive, we continue to plan and respond to the situation. The Assembly's normal legislative process was not designed to deal with such a rapidly changing situation, but we have been able to ensure that Departments will have access to the cash that they require to deliver vital services. I express my gratitude once again to the Finance Committee, which acknowledged the unique circumstances in which we have found ourselves this year. Accelerated passage and the additional step of suspending Standing Order 42(5) were essential to allow the continuation of public services. Even when the Bill passes this Final Stage, there will be other steps to be completed before Royal Assent is secured, and I have written to the British Secretary of State to ensure that that is expedited as soon as possible.

I thank all of the departmental Committees and, indeed, all Members for the level of scrutiny that they have been able to bring to the process in the time available.

I know that some Members have raised concerns about the limited opportunity for scrutiny of the Bill. I assure all Members that I will bring the Main Estimates and a further budget Bill to the Assembly in early autumn. There will be every opportunity for Members to debate the Executive's up-to-date 2020-21 expenditure plans at that time.

This is the Final Stage of the legislative process for the Bill and the further Vote on Account that it provides. I look forward to hearing any final thoughts from Members on this important legislation.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his remarks. As Members will be aware, the Budget Bill that is before the House provides the statutory authority to allow public expenditure to continue until the Assembly votes on the Main Estimates for 2020-21. As the Minister mentioned, we fully anticipate that occurring by early September. We are acutely aware that the need for an earlier than anticipated Budget Bill is necessary as a result of the increased spending from the current COVID pandemic. The Committee for Finance took evidence on the Budget (No. 2) Bill from Department of Finance officials on 23 May. As I mentioned at Second Stage, the absence of the Bill would have had significant

consequences for the ability of Departments to respond to the challenges that are being faced across our society.

As Members know, Budget Bills typically pass under the accelerated passage procedure to expedite the process and provide the necessary authority for Departmental spending. However, as I indicated at Second Stage, the Committee has a specific scrutiny and consultation role on Budget Bills. It is only when that happens that the Committee can satisfy itself that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals in the Bill. That is a fundamental requirement on the basis of which the Committee considers whether it is content to grant accelerated passage. Just as important, there is a responsibility on Departments to provide timely, relevant and accurate information to their Committees with transparency and openness. While the Committee for Finance has arrived at a position with the Department of Finance where it is being afforded, mostly, the opportunity for consultation and scrutiny at departmental and Executive level, that has not been the experience of all Committees and Departments.

Openness and transparency are necessary to afford Committees the opportunity to effectively scrutinise departmental spending proposals and understand the rationale for their intended approach. They also afford the Committee for Finance the opportunity to understand the position of each Committee on the priorities of their Department. Having developed templates to support scrutiny by Committees, we found it disappointing to hear from the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance Committee and the Chair of the Justice Committee that the Committee for Justice did not receive the completed template form from the Department of Justice but had to rely on papers sent to the Committee for Finance to understand what was going on in the Department of Justice. I want to make it clear that, in future, the Committee for Finance will work to ensure that all Committees receive the information that they need to undertake appropriate financial scrutiny, and I ask the Minister to make it clear to his Executive colleagues that he supports me in doing so and, indeed, all the Committees in the Assembly.

As I have previously acknowledged, the Committee welcomes the engagement from the Department on the Bill. After reviewing the Hansard report of last week's Supply resolution and Second Stage debates, I was pleased to see some healthy debate and the validity of points that were raised during that business.

We are now entering a pivotal phase that requires us to design and deliver a credible plan over the short-to-medium term to help us to cope, as best as we can, with the challenges that, we all recognise, we will face; indeed, that should be our collective aim. At its meeting tomorrow, the Committee will consider important matters and options to support ongoing and effective scrutiny at a departmental and cross-cutting strategic level. They include options that will aim to support and promote economic activity at a strategic level, using levers such as procurement, borrowing and the use of financial transactions capital (FTC) and how we can make use of those levers in the future through continued Committee and Assembly scrutiny. From a departmental perspective, the Committee will also be interested in the targeted rates support for those most adversely by the pandemic and in identifying where further efficiencies can be made through public

sector reform to enable us to pull ourselves out of the COVID pandemic.

2.15 pm

Assuming that the Bill receives Royal Assent, it will become the Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020. Of course, Minister, that is not the end of the Committee's scrutiny role. Monitoring rounds are an integral part of the role of Committees in scrutinising how the legislation is implemented through the scrutiny of public expenditure by Departments in the course of the financial year. This week, Committees should be considering their Department's position for the June monitoring round in advance of monitoring returns being submitted to the Department of Finance's public spending directorate (PSD). It was my intention from this platform to urge all scrutiny Committees to take the opportunity of the June monitoring round to explore in depth with their Departments exactly what pressures are being faced, the details of bids, the rationale of any movement of resource and the rationale for retention of resources when spend to date has been less than anticipated.

The in-year monitoring process is a critical opportunity for Departments to identify any reduced requirements to support the Executive in reallocating resources in-year. It is also an important opportunity for Committees to ensure that that happens. That, in turn, will maximise the resources available and minimise the risk of money being lost to the Treasury at the end of the financial year. Unfortunately, the Department of Finance has informed the Committee that, due to an exercise to look at reprioritising measures to fund pressures arising from COVID-19, it will not be able to provide the Committee with details of its June monitoring position at this week's meeting. While the Minister and his officials may think that that is appropriate, the deadline for Departments to provide information to PSD has not been moved. That suggests that Departments are being asked to bypass Committees and submit their monitoring returns to PSD in advance of any Committee scrutiny.

I have asked the Department of Finance's officials to attend tomorrow's meeting of the Finance Committee to outline the process being undertaken in the reprioritising exercise and to explain why they cannot provide oral evidence on June monitoring at this stage. I also want to ask the Minister to clarify whether he intends to put back the deadline for submission of departmental monitoring returns so as to provide Committees with the opportunity to consider them in advance. In view of the latitude with which the Assembly has facilitated the Minister and other Departments, that should be the very least that we all expect.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the Bill.

Mr Frew: I thank the Chairperson of the Finance Committee for his contribution and for reinforcing the issues of transparency and accountability and the scrutiny that is placed on our shoulders to ensure that we pass legislation that is fit for purpose. A Minister may well bring a Bill to the House but it is the Assembly that passes the legislation, so we have a critical role, as do the scrutiny Committees. There is absolutely no doubt that we are in unique times and that things are fast-moving, but this is more of a time to scrutinise further and deeper into legislation that the House passes. I am tremendously worried about what we all heard the Chairperson of the Finance Committee say about scrutiny. He, quite aptly,

raised the issue that I raised during a debate last week about the way in which the Justice Department has treated the Justice Committee, of which I am also a member.

If I knew then what I know now, I am not even sure that I would support the Department of Finance in the accelerated passage of the Bill. I know that it is the norm that a Budget Bill, for good reason, receives accelerated passage, but I have grave concerns about the transparency of these Departments, the secrecy in which they still conduct business and the way that they treat scrutiny Committees with disdain. We have raised issue upon issue in the Committee. We have done our job in the Committee for Finance. We have asked deep and meaningful questions; not because we want to be awkward or troublesome but because we want to do our job thoroughly, efficiently and effectively, so that the scrutiny Committees can not only scrutinise the Departments but that they can be of assistance and offer guidance and support to the Departments and the Ministers. I must say that I am aggrieved and really concerned by the stance that has been taken by the Department of Finance around financial and budgetary matters.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will recall the debates that we have had and the media interest in the information around the failed personal protective equipment (PPE) order from China. The scrutiny Committee asked for all emails concerning that issue. It is a budgetary matter, in the crisis that we are in, that will effect the Budget to no end in the coming months and, in fact, probably years. When the Committee asked for all emails concerning that issue, it received a raft of emails that could be easily itemised and timelined. Members realised that there were two days on which there were no emails: 30 and 31 March. Therefore, we asked whether there were no emails on those days, and, if there were, why had we not been given them? We received a response right on the limit of the deadline. That response was from the Minister, who stated:

"The email exchanges between officials over 30 and 31 March, in connection with the order, essentially relate to volumes, products, specifications and pricing. These exchanges were not regarded by officials as relevant to the Committee's original request".

The original request was for all emails in connection to that issue; not some, not a when, but all emails. All emails. The Minister said that the officials did not think that we would want to see them because they were all about dry stuff like volumes, products, specifications and pricing. Every single one of the emails that we did read was about volumes, products, specifications and pricing, so what is the difference?

When a scrutiny Committee asks for all emails, we expect to get all emails. It is not up to an official or a Minister to decide what the Committee should get or what the Committee would like to see. We would like to see all emails when we ask for all emails, so I am very aggrieved that we are in front of the Minister and the Department and that we are in the House to pass very important legislation through accelerated passage — in a way that we have never done before because of the second Vote on Account — and the Department cannot even furnish the scrutiny Committee with the emails that it requested. How long do we have to wait?

When the Minister gave us the explanation as to why the officials did not send us the emails from those two days, he did not even furnish us with those emails, so they are still being withheld. Better than that, Mr Deputy Speaker, a BBC freedom of information request was issued on the same lines, with similar requests, and the Department of Finance has refused that freedom of information request.

We conduct serious business in the Assembly and every single piece of legislation that we pass will affect every single person in our country, not least a Vote on Account and a Budget Bill. Yet the very people who should have first sight of those things, on a scrutiny Committee, are refused access to those emails. That cannot take place. We were promised that we would not be going back to business as usual. Yet what I see is even more secrecy in our Departments and even more subterfuge. We were given the explanation that the emails are too dry and too factual for a scrutiny Committee. Really? Is that where we are in this place? Is that what we are going to pass here today? That is totally and utterly unacceptable and cannot take place.

I, as an individual MLA, cannot and will not support accelerated passage any more for any further legislation that comes before this House or a Committee, nor will I play ball with officials when they want to break deadlines, as the Chair mentioned, passing cans down the road with regard to the scrutiny Committees, yet not changing deadlines for Committees to scrutinise the work of the Departments. That is unacceptable. That rot will creep in to every single Department in this place and will affect transparency and accountability to the point where, even in this House, we cannot get a panoramic view of what is being conducted by our officials and Ministers in our Departments. That cannot take place. I will play no part in that and nor should any MLA worth their salt who values their job and has personal pride in the scrutiny role that they play to scrutinise the Departments and to support, guide and advise. That is not the place that we want to be.

I am aggrieved at having to stand here today to talk about these issues because we were promised a better place. We were promised that Departments would be more accountable. There would be no secrecy, yet we have Ministers and Departments on a weekly basis now preventing the work of the scrutiny Committees and trying to hold up the work of the scrutiny Committees. It is unacceptable, it cannot take place, it should not take place, and I will play no part in that. I expect to see those emails as does the rest of the Committee. If we do not see the emails, we will compel witnesses, and it will not be Ministers and permanent secretaries. We will compel the very people who constructed the emails.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. While all this is very enlightening and may well be valid, I am at a loss to know what it has to do with the Budget Bill?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has talked about the exceptional circumstances regarding the Budget Bill, and I am allowing a degree of flexibility around the points that he is making, but he needs to return to the subject.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will take heed of your warning and your ruling on that. It is everything to do with this Budget Bill and this Vote on Account, this very peculiar second Vote on Account. If the Department

cannot even furnish the Committee with emails that we know exist, where are we all in the Assembly when it comes to scrutiny? It makes a joke of this place. It really does. It destroys the credibility of the Assembly, it destroys the credibility of the scrutiny Committees and it destroys the credibility of democracy. That is something that I will guard very carefully.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. I endorse everything that he has said to date about scrutiny, accountability and openness. He said that we were promised no return to the status quo, and the idea that civil servants and Ministers will decide what is and is not of interest to Committees is not only wrong, it is deeply shocking in a post-RHI environment. What he has said has everything to do with this Bill because it has everything to do with everything that we do in the House, and I commend him for making the points.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for the intervention. I agree 100% with him. I am glad that he supports me in this, and I suspect that every single MLA in the House should too because that is where we need to be. We need to get to a place where there is total transparency and openness between Departments and the MLAs who sit on these Benches, irrespective of party politics or what party you are from.

It is our job as MLAs to scrutinise legislation and policy in our Committees. If we cannot do that or, worse still, are prevented from doing that by a Minister, a Department and officials, we are in a very grave place. I thank the Member for his contribution.

2.30 pm

To get back to the Bill, we have no choice really because bills need to be paid and money needs to flow. However, Departments, including the Department of Finance, need to do so much better. If we have to compel officials to come before our Committees, we will do so. We will get to the truth by hook or by crook. Whether it takes us a week, a month or a year, we will not let this drop. I will not let this drop. I want to see everything and have the information in front of me so that I can judge things on my own. Nobody, except the Committee and its individual members, should decide what information we get and do not get. In this day and age, after everything that we have been through, it is unacceptable that any Department can stop information flowing to a scrutiny Committee. Preventing information going to a scrutiny Committee is unacceptable, unjust and diabolical.

Ms Dolan: The Committee for Finance, of which I am a member, has been kept informed of the financial resources that are necessary to support Departments and of the need for the Bill to complete the necessary stages swiftly. While recognising that this is not ideal — the Minister himself has acknowledged that it is a very unusual step — we need to be realistic about the consequences of not progressing the legislation in this way. The unusual nature of this measure is reflective of the uncertainty that the COVID crisis has brought with it. Our block grant, which in real terms is £360 million below pre-austerity levels, has left us with health, education, infrastructure and other sectors starved of the resources that they so badly need on a day-to-day basis, not to mention in the midst of a global pandemic.

The way in which the Minister has handled all this must be commended. Since the outset of the crisis, the Minister and his officials have fought to protect livelihoods. He has also ensured that resources have been made available to assist those most in need. All of that has been done, as I said, in the context of a global health pandemic, which brings not only consequences for the health and well-being of our loved ones but very difficult economic consequences. This Budget Bill basically provides authority for Departments to continue to spend until the detailed Main Estimates can be debated later in the year. As I have already said, the consequences of not progressing this legislation would be dire.

Mr O'Toole: This is another debate on authorising spending in which we will support the authorisation of the spending but, I am afraid, lament the lack of scrutiny that we have been able to do. I and my party will support the passage of the Bill. As I have done in the past, I commend the Minister and his officials on the speed with which they have been able to disperse funds in the midst of this crisis. It is worth putting on record, particularly as I am a former civil servant, that civil servants here have worked very hard to make things happen at a rate of knots that they would not normally have done.

Having said that, I will follow on from the fairly strong remarks that Mr Frew made. He and I do not agree on all that much but there are certain things on which we occasionally find some agreement. He is broadly right that we need to increase the collective scrutiny that we do as an Assembly and specifically on finance. Hopefully, the Minister himself would agree that we need to have much greater scrutiny of our budgetary processes going forward. That is not just a reaction to the RHI scandal, important though that is in shaping the entire context of this mandate, as it should given the real collapse in public trust that it prompted.

Part of the reason is the frankly fundamental facts that, in the Northern Ireland Assembly, we have a mandatory power-sharing coalition in the Executive. Through that, we have very few means of setting strategic priorities. One of those is the Programme for Government process; we do not have one agreed yet. The other one, which connects to our Programme for Government process, is our budgetary allocation and how we do that.

The Department of Finance and the Minister of Finance are, in a sense, disproportionately important to the strategic priority setting and delivery of the Northern Ireland institutions. It is not just important that we do more scrutiny of Executive spending, though that is really important, and I will come on to a little bit of that in a couple of moments.

I am sorry to labour the point, but it is also important that we see a more joined-up and strategic approach to government. As I said, while it is welcome that Departments, officials and, occasionally, Ministers have acted quickly in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, sometimes, to be perfectly honest, they have acted a little too quickly; certainly too quickly in terms of public communication. That has led to a sense that, occasionally, we are engaging in pop-up policy and are getting back to some of the habits that we were, unfortunately, renowned for as an institution, in the earlier part of this decade. We need to get away from that. We need a joined-up

Programme for Government and a budgetary process that is connected to that.

As I said, the Budget that was tabled to the Assembly last month was slightly inconsistent. It referred occasionally to the Programme for Government; presumably, the 2016 Programme for Government and those headings. Some Departments referred to them. I think that DAERA did. Other Departments did not refer to them at all. We need to address that sense of slightly confused priority setting, notwithstanding the fact that COVID-19 has shaped everything.

Moving on, I will repeat some of my hobby horses about the need for long-term fiscal priority setting. In yesterday's debate on Caoimhe Archibald's motion on economic recovery, I discussed the importance of a new approach to our fiscal policymaking in Northern Ireland, which, I think, could be guided by the creation of a fiscal commission, in collaboration with the fiscal council that the 'New Decade, New Approach' document set out. I hope that the Minister is in a position to give us an update today on how we are doing with that work. As we come through COVID, we need to strike while the iron is hot in setting up some of these institutions and putting down the foundations for agreeing, first, how we do short-term recovery. As other Members have pointed out, we still do not have the recovery plan from the Department for the Economy. It also about agreeing a medium and long-term set of priorities.

I have laboured on a few points that I have laboured on before. I think that they are worth putting on the record again. I will briefly remind the Finance Minister that it would cost a very small amount of money for us to support local media. That very small amount of money would be not quite a rounding error, as these are important sums of money, particularly in the context of constraints. However, local media is extremely important to our local communities. If we lose it, and we could lose quite a chunk of it because of the crisis, we probably will not get it back.

Having repeated myself a few times and having raised a few important points to put them back on the record, I will leave the Floor to others.

Mr Muir: We have debated a lot of these issues, so I will try to be brief. As the previous Member to speak said, I will try to avoid repetition.

The Alliance Party will vote for the Budget (No. 2) Bill. We will do so because the Departments urgently require additional resources and in anticipation of the Main Estimates being delivered in the autumn. The implications of not passing the Budget (No. 2) Bill today is something that neither I nor the Alliance Party is prepared to contemplate at this moment when society needs stability from government and properly funded public services.

This is my first experience of a Budget process as a Member of the Assembly, and I want to thank the officials who have worked under extraordinary circumstances to get us to this point. The Budget process thus far has, indeed, been extraordinary. However, I sincerely hope that next year's Budget process is nothing like this one. I hope that, by then, we will long have been working towards a strategic economic recovery plan, delivered by the Executive. I hope that we are agreeing a multi-year Budget for a multi-year Programme for Government, and I hope that there will be sufficient time for thorough scrutiny by the

Statutory Committees. These are not nice-to-haves for the next Budget Bill; they are, in fact, essential requirements.

The onset of COVID-19 makes this a financial year like no other, but the underlying challenges to the financing of our public services remain exactly the same and cannot be ignored.

The time for Ministers to tackle the cost of division — £800 million a year — is now. The time to implement Bengoa is now. The time for an independent review of education is now. The time for public sector reform is now. The time to invest in our infrastructure is now. Those issues have been kicked down the road for a long time, and now there is little road left. We need to make sure that we use our public finances correctly and to best effect. Those issues need to be faced up to, because, if they are not, we will end up with public services that are not sufficiently funded to get us through the crisis and towards recovery and renewal.

2.45 pm

COVID-19 is not the reason to put those reforms on the back-burner — quite the opposite. Those reforms can no more afford to wait than the 300,000 people on our hospital waiting lists can. The newly restored Assembly has the chance to transform public services in the midst of what should be a green recovery. We owe it to the people of Northern Ireland, who have risen to the challenges over the past few months in so many ways, to deliver.

Mr O'Dowd: This is the first opportunity that I have had to speak about the process for this Budget Bill. I was thinking about the entire process, and I accept Members' concerns about the accelerated passage of any legislation. I fully agree that Committees need to scrutinise. Committees will have to get their game faces on in the weeks and months ahead, because, in my opinion and the opinion of many, we are in for a very difficult period financially and economically. To get the best out of our limited resources, Committees will have to be to the fore.

I do not know about the validity of Mr Frew's arguments. My concern was not that he was raising the argument; it was about relevance to the debate. I suspect that some of his comments were directed to somebody who is not in the Chamber rather than somebody who is, but that is not my concern.

In most legislatures, when the Finance Minister comes in to deliver the Budget, it is about a number of matters, but core to it is taxation. What levels will the Minister set taxation at? Where does he or she plan to collect taxation? Where does he or she plan to reduce taxation? What are the motivations behind that? Obviously, one of the motivations is that you need finances to deliver public services and drive the economy. That is the main driver. The other purpose of taxation is to shape public policy and public behaviour. Think of taxation on smoking and consumption of alcohol: it is about shaping public behaviour.

Here we have a process that is not about any of those; it is about divvying up very limited resources among the various Departments as best we can. One of the roles of a Committee is to scrutinise how Departments spend their budgets, and I have seen that from both sides of the fence as a member of a scrutiny Committee and as a Minister. I used to come to the House as Education Minister with a budget, and, quite rightly, I would be asked about my

spending. People would read out a list of priorities, and I would say to them, "There's £1.9 billion there. Divide it up as you wish, but that's all that's there". It is about priorities, and everybody — political parties and individuals — will have different priorities; I accept that. It is about priorities. In the instance I mentioned, we had £1.9 billion, and Members would ask me questions such as "What are we going to do about this?" and say "We need to spend money on that", but we still came back to the pot of £1.9 billion and how we were going to spend that. The Finance Minister has considerably more than that, but the issue is how you divide up a certain pot.

I have no doubt that, as the debate goes on, Members will say, "We need to spend money on A, B, C and D" and "This is a very worthy cause" and "That's a very worthy cause". Mr O'Toole, who has left the Chamber, mentioned newspapers. Offering newspapers money is always a good way to get your name into them. That is another good cause. Here is where the rub comes and where the maturity of politics comes. You hear commentators saying — sometimes, I find it offensive; at other times, I am prepared to give them some leeway on it — "Politics needs to mature". Some of our commentators need to mature, but that is another matter. How will politics mature? The day and hour that we enter the Chamber and start talking about how we raise taxation — not individual taxes but taxation in general — and how we gather income into the coffers there will be a challenge. You tax A, B or C or you reduce tax or you find a new tax, but you have to have a motivation for that taxation. There is a need for the Executive to have the levers to allow the Finance Minister to properly fund public services and to allow the Executive, as a whole, to drive the economic recovery that is required after COVID-19 and its implications. The next debate — the mature debate — has to be about how we set up and bring fiscal powers to the Executive.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I came back into the Chamber and am really glad that he is talking about this, because I agree with him. Does he agree that, for a body with new fiscal powers to be created, it also has to have economic forecasting responsibilities? It cannot be narrowly focused on the revenue-raising and spending side.

Mr O'Dowd: The exact scope of a commission does not cause me any particular angst. I have concerns, sometimes, that, when bodies are established with economic forecasting powers, they direct the economic process rather than the elected politicians. It is always a fine balance, but I accept the theory that the Member refers to.

I look forward to the debate in which we talk about what taxation is being gathered —.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will, yes.

Mr Muir: We need to have a discussion about revenue raising, but does the Member agree that the next discussion that we need to have is about how we spend our money? We have taken our health service apart to deal with COVID-19. Is it legitimate to put it back together without implementing Bengoa?

Mr O'Dowd: That goes back to the point that I made about being on the other side of the fence as a Minister.

I came into the Chamber and said that I had £1.9 billion and asked Members how they wanted to spend it. We know how much money we have, and there is nothing to stop an individual, a political party or a Committee coming forward with alternative proposals, not necessarily for the Budget immediately but in terms of departmental plans, moving forward. If individuals, parties or Committees have alternatives, they should bring them forward. That is as much a challenge to my party as it is to everybody else in the Chamber. We know what we have, so how do we spend it?

I do not wish to repeat yesterday's debate about economic recovery, but points have been made about a fair recovery and a green recovery, a recovery that sees the front-line workers whom we have relied on over the last number of weeks and months being properly resourced and paid. That all brings me back to taxation. In my opinion, that is the next big challenge for the Assembly and the body politic in this society: whom do we tax, how do we tax, why do we tax and what do we spend it on?

Mr Catney: As my colleague said, we support the Bill. I heard what Mr Frew said, and I would prefer that all of the information is given to us at the right time. I do not know all of the reasons, but, as the weeks go by, I would undoubtedly prefer to move on and do the job for which I was elected, which is to scrutinise what comes before us.

I note the Minister's rationale, and I have remarked previously about the 80% spend. How confident is he about that? Again, I want to make the point that the Bill's purpose is to serve the Departments until the end of October, so that we are not creating massive financial stress for Departments for the next five months. I would say that there will be other Budgets. I do not know; I am not the expert. I do not have a crystal ball that allows me to say that. I know that there is money there that, looking down through it, has been held back from infrastructure projects. If we are going to drive our economy on, we need that spend.

There are those in business, such as accountants, who will save £1 million in order to set the books right. However, there is also the salesman, who will spend that £1 million in order to make an extra million.

I hear what they are saying about taxation powers. I, too, would welcome that debate, and I am up for it.

All Members are aware of the financial stresses that we are under. I am pleased that the Minister announced the extension to the rates holiday. I congratulate him on that. The Committee sent him a letter stating that at the time. I want to approve the funding. Early warnings of spending pressures are vital to us. If the Minister could see that those warnings came to the Committee as quickly as possible, as we scrutinise, we could share the burden and heavy lifting that has to be done. I ask the Minister and his Department to see that we are furnished with those as quickly as possible.

Since we got up and running, we have been chasing our tails with the Budget process. We are about to put through a second Bill, through accelerated passage, with the hope of a further Bill in the autumn. How confident is the Minister that we can get ahead with the process to allow the important high level of scrutiny that is required?

Finally, I will mention the crisis that no one seems to want to talk about, and which we will be debating today: Brexit. I hope that we can have a true, honest debate on Brexit because it warrants that.

Mr Lynch: I rise as a member of the Committee and to support the Bill. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we face an unprecedented public expenditure situation. The scale, timing and pace of the COVID crisis did not allow for the normal Budget processes to be carried out and meant that Standing Orders had to be suspended to allow for accelerated passage of the Budget to take place. The reality is that the Departments had to deal with emerging public health crises and get funding out the door as quickly as possible. In some cases, it took days to do what previously would have taken weeks. I commend the Minister for getting the money out the door as fast as possible. Many businesses and people appreciate that.

The Budget Bill is required in order to ensure that public services can continue to be delivered during the COVID-19 response period. As we emerge from the lockdown, it will ensure that the health service is supported and businesses and the most vulnerable are protected.

As we move forward, as others have said, and see some light at the end of the tunnel, a new concept has emerged: the new normal. As I reflect back on the old normal, I realise that there are many things that we should not be seeking to return to, such as the underfunding of vital services; a pursuance of the policy of austerity; the way in which we treat and support our front-line workers; the zero contract issue; a society in which a low percentage of people own 90% of the wealth; a society where CEOs of major organisations, public and private, earn millions in bonuses; a society in which huge inequalities exist, and where those inequalities between those who earn the most and those who earn the least have been massively exacerbated. There are, and will be, better ways of doing things. We should reflect on the lessons learned from COVID.

We are facing financial challenges, as my colleague said a minute ago. We already had pressure on the Budget and, as we know, pressures on the public services have increased over this time. The British Government have also reneged on some of their responsibilities in the New Deal, New Approach agreement. The reality is that all of those financial challenges remain, and we must all make the argument for further investment in our public services — services that have been vital in this public health crisis, and which were stripped bare during 10 years of austerity.

As a recovery Budget plan is debated and formulated, we will oppose any attempt to implement an austerity road to recovery. Evidence over the past decade shows that austerity is counterproductive to building any notion of a fair economy. We should strive for sustainable employment and improved working conditions for many of our low-paid workers, particularly those on the front line who have been pivotal during the pandemic. Over the past week, I have heard nurses say, "Stop the clapping and give us a decent salary and recognition for work we have carried out".

The Minister has spoken about how he has asked Departments to look at major capital projects, projects such as the Magee medical school, Casement Park, the A5 and, I should add, the proposed new healthcare centre in Lisnaskea, a project for which I have argued for many

years. No doubt, there are many other projects that could be expedited and be key drivers in the economic recovery.

Something that we have learned from this pandemic and through this Budget process is that decisions and measures can be taken quickly. I support the Final Stage of the Bill.

Mr Nesbitt: As ever, Mr O'Dowd made some very interesting and challenging points, and, while I am not going to support him on what he was talking about regarding taxes in the speech that he made, I would certainly welcome the debate.

I agree with him that a measure of the maturity of the devolved Administrations would be whether we were capable and trusted with taking on decision-making on taxes, but, as Mr O'Toole said, surely we should not be doing that without some sort of independent assessment of budgetary forecasting, much like the Office for Budget Responsibility in London. Indeed, for some years now, we have committed to a similar body called the fiscal council, most recently in New Decade, New Approach, that would have an independent view on our finances. I have certainly argued that that should also take an independent look at how we deliver on the Programme for Government because, if we are going to outcomes-based approaches, those have to be measured. There must be data, but that data can be manipulated, so I think that it is important that we are mature enough to bring in experts who are independent and who can mark our homework and say whether a Department that says that it has done what it said it would do has actually delivered.

For example, Deputy Speaker, if you will allow me to roam this far, in the previous mandate, there was a commitment to giving preschool places to families with children under 4, and, at one point, the Executive were claiming a success rate of over 90%. However, if you drilled down into that statistic, you found that in my constituency, for example, a family from Newtownards was being offered four hours a day in a facility in Suffolk in west Belfast, so, by the time they got there, left off the child and got home, it was time to collect, so it was of no use to them and they did not avail themselves of it, but it was counted as a success and made up part of that 90%. So, I think that we do need independent assessment, but we also need scrutiny.

I noticed that Mr O'Dowd raised a point of order to try to stop Mr Frew when he was on his theme of the lack of accountability and transparency and full delivery of what the scrutiny Committee had asked for. We cannot be doing that. We need to be fully open and transparent. If we are going to go down the road that Mr O'Dowd proposes — I am very open to that debate — of having some control over how we raise taxes, where we raise them, how much we raise them and how we spend them, we surely have been absolutely assured that this Chamber and its scrutiny Committees are getting full, open and transparent access to the information that we want, otherwise we are walking into another RHI.

I will finish, and I appreciate, Deputy Speaker, that you are allowing me to stray from the —.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with everything that he says. The problem with tax-varying powers is that sometimes you tend to touch the levers too much, and they can go both ways. So you can come under political pressure to reduce taxation as well as having the

pain of increasing it. More than that, you would still have a limited pot of money. No matter how much you raised, you would still have a limited pot of money. It is about the efficiency of that spend as much as anything. As much as having the powers, it is how efficient you can be at spending that money that is the real scrutiniser that we need to drill down into to make sure that money is being spent in the best way.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is exactly why I am saying today that I would welcome the debate rather than saying that I back the proposal. I do accept that it would be a great sign of maturity if we were able to take on those powers and wield them in an efficient and effective manner on behalf of our people.

3.00 pm

By and large, the Civil Service does a fantastic job, not least at the moment in the middle of this crisis, but we must remember that there is a culture in the Civil Service, possibly not just the UK Civil Service but more globally, of withholding information. I was at a retirement party some time ago for a senior civil servant. I think that the person speaking at the party forgot that there were elected representatives in the room — there were only a couple of us — because he talked about a moment when the person who was retiring had appeared before a Committee of parliamentarians in London and three times in a row had refused to answer an MP's question. The speaker said, "That elevated you to rock-star status with us in the Civil Service".

We need scrutiny powers, and we need to exercise them. Of course, we need to work with our Civil Service colleagues, but we must remember that there is some degree of culture that we must break through if we are to get a truly open, honest, transparent and accountable culture, which is absolutely necessary when we are dealing with money.

Miss Woods: I was not initially intending to speak at this stage, given that most of the points that I had raised were discussed at Second Stage. I will not rehearse them. I want, however, to note the issues that have already been raised by the Chair of the Finance Committee and by my colleague on the Justice Committee, Mr Paul Frew, who rightly and passionately spoke about information not being fully given to some Committee members. He also spoke about the lack of time for scrutiny of this Vote on Account and Budget (No. 2) Bill by the Assembly and its Committees in general, which has also been highlighted. That is not even to mention the lack of New Decade, New Approach priorities.

I recognise that the Vote on Account and the Bill are simply about cash release in order for Departments to front-load and stay afloat. I reiterate what I said at Second Stage, however: noting the situation that we find ourselves in, we must never be put in this position again on budgetary matters.

There also appears to be an issue outstanding that is important to mention, and it is one that I have been raising since I first spoke on Budgets in the Assembly. It stems from yesterday's events and from some Members' comments today on how we spend our money. It was said that others could bring forward ideas. That is in the context of a motion moved by the Minister's party yesterday

afternoon on planning for a just economic recovery after the COVID-19 crisis. We in the Green Party welcomed such debate yesterday and recognised the need to deal with the imbalance that we now have in our society and economy and the need to make things fair for everyone. It was disappointing that we were not afforded the opportunity to speak to the motion, but I will do so today.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she think that it is important that alternative voices be heard in the Assembly and in society — green voices, socialist voices and other voices — in every debate?

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention. I completely agree. Given that we have seven Members of the Assembly not in the Executive, it is really important that all our voices in the so-called naughty corner be heard.

What we have in the Budget (No. 2) Bill and the further —.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will give way.

Dr Aiken: Where you are sitting is normally the Ulster Unionist Party's position, not the naughty corner, but thank you.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention. We are adhering to the social distancing arrangements, so that is why we have taken up camp here.

What we have in the Budget (No. 2) Bill and the further Vote on Account is a package of financial measures designed to keep Departments afloat until the autumn, yet, remarkably, they do not include any specific allocations related to an economic recovery plan or to a fairer and just transition to a more sustainable economy post coronavirus. Does the Minister agree that there appears to be a bit of a disjuncture in that regard? We are allocating resources to Departments that need them and rightly so, but, as far as I can see from the minimal detail on spending areas, it is unclear how the Executive even intend to resource their recovery plan. Last Friday, the Minister for the Economy published her Department's document on first steps towards economic recovery, which, again, is very light on detail and lacks a clear, coherent vision for our economy for when we come out the other side of the crisis. It certainly is not the basis for a green new deal or for a just transition.

What discussions has the Minister had with his counterpart in the Department for the Economy to make sure that any future strategies and stages of economic recovery are adequately resourced? Does he think that this Budget Bill will have any implications for what was agreed to yesterday? Have there been any bids for resources from the Minister for the Economy that are tied to a fair and just transitional plan or strategy or to a green stimulus package to make sure that we move towards a more sustainable economy? Is the Budget (No. 2) Bill simply a case of returning to business as usual after the crisis and makes no funding available for what the motion agreed to yesterday seeks to do? What approach is the Minister taking when it comes to properly resourcing an economic recovery plan?

Of course, we recognise that a fair and just transition to a green, sustainable future is the responsibility not of just one Minister or Department but of the Executive as a whole. Nevertheless, perhaps the Minister can update

the House on how the Executive's approach to economic recovery will be adequately resourced by the Bill in the context of yesterday's motion and what we are discussing today about cash allocation.

Mr Carroll: I will not speak at length. I have raised fundamental flaws with the Bill ad nauseam, but there still are problems with scrutiny and a lack of detail. What Mr Frew raised is concerning. We probably would not agree on much, but what he raised is very concerning. I hope that he might consider joining me in voting against the Bill for that reason, but I guess he probably will not. What he raised suggests echoes of RHI. Very recently, we were told that everyone had, supposedly, learnt a lesson, but it appears from what he has suggested or implied that maybe some have not.

The problem with the Bill is that it has no economic strategy tied to it that breaks with the past or breaks with the politics of austerity. As I have repeatedly emphasised, there have been at least £50 million of cuts to our health trusts in the middle — I emphasise that again — the middle of a global pandemic. I concur with Rachel Woods: it is ironic that the Minister's MLAs supported a motion yesterday on the need for a just economic recovery, something that I support and, unfortunately, did not get a chance to speak on. The Minister's Budget does not do anything of the sort. It continues the old normal. When will there be a break with the old economic and political orthodoxy? Somebody once said, "If not now, when?"

For those reasons, I cannot support the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. There are fundamental problems with the details of cuts to the trusts and a lack of detail in other areas. Ultimately, it does not reflect what is needed to ensure that the state plays a fundamental and crucial role in supporting people. Every economist predicts a massive economic recession — the worst in 300 years — but there are no measures in the Bill to support people at this time. For those reasons, I will not support the Budget Bill.

Mr Murphy: I thank all the Members who have expressed their views in the debate today and those who have contributed to the debates over the last number of weeks. We have covered every topic, mostly not related to the Budget Bill in front of us, but we have certainly covered every topic anyway. I have listened with interest to opinions that differ from mine, but it is still useful for me, as Finance Minister, to hear all the views expressed.

I acknowledge the Committee's role in supporting accelerated passage for the Bill from the outset. I come back to the point that this is an unusual method. It is to release more money to Departments to take account of the fact that, during this challenging time of pandemic, the Departments may spend in excess of what we had already released to them. It was not about resetting priorities; it was about giving effect to the Budget that was agreed on 31 March. No matter how many times I explain that, it seems that there are people who just do not get it or, perhaps, choose not to get it and want to engage in other debates.

I entirely accept the Chair's point about the scrutiny role of Committees for all Departments. In my time, I have chaired scrutiny Committees, and I agree with the need for information sharing with Committees. It is something that I absolutely believe in, and I am happy to look at all requests from Committees.

It was made clear that the monitoring round for June coincides with a much more significant reprioritisation exercise going round all Departments. As both events were taking place at the one time, while officials were happy to go to the Committee tomorrow, they may not have the information that the Committee will require at that stage. The information is more likely to be available next week. They will attend the Committee tomorrow and will return to the Committee to provide further evidence as the exercise proceeds. I can assure you that the Committee will be provided with full details of the Departments June monitoring returns and assessment of COVID pressures. The Committee will have the opportunity to review and scrutinise those pressures and take evidence from officials, and that will take place before the Executive consider the Department's returns and make decisions on the way forward. I hope that that satisfies the Committee and gives it certainty about the information going to it.

Paul Frew spoke with the zeal of a convert about disclosure. I am sure that it was not lost on him that there was further disclosure today on matters that were in front of the RHI inquiry that involved the current chief executive of his party. I presume that he will bring the same righteous indignation to party meetings when the disclosure of information is discussed. I suspect that, if he were to do so, he would not remain in the position of Deputy Chair, but there you go. Nonetheless, he has a position here. Of course, I am happy to consider any requests for appropriate information from the Committee, and I will look again at the issues.

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: No. You have had your chance for your performance; now I am having my chance to have my say. As I say, I would be interested to see whether you bring the same level of indignation to your party meetings. I very much doubt that you do.

Matthew O'Toole was right to acknowledge civil servants, an issue that Seán Lynch touched on as well. The speed of decision-making — he raised other converse points — is a lesson for going forward. We had a significant reputation for sluggishness in turning things around. Obviously, I can speak mostly about the people in my Department with whom I have worked over the past number of months, but the way in which people rose to the task and showed willingness to take risks to get matters quickly and get support on the ground to meet a very challenging situation was commendable. That, of course, requires scrutiny. In attempting to achieve haste, you must not lose propriety. However, there is a lesson for the future in how quickly the system here can respond to political priorities as they develop and can be much more efficient in its approach.

I agree with Mr O'Toole on the need for a joined-up approach, and any significant intervention that we made with COVID-19 money was made on the basis of the three main themes: support for public health; support for business; and support for the vulnerable. It was under those three broad categories that the Executive agreed to issue money. Most was allocated in sizeable portions so that we could bring all bids into the template and allocate accordingly. All had Executive agreement.

I also agree with the Member on Ministers going out on their own and adopting their own position, but we cannot censor all our Ministers. We can criticise them, but

we cannot censor them. They have the ability to issue their own view of things. It has been a very challenging situation, one that no Executive have experienced. When restored on 11 January, this Executive faced the significant challenges, as Members outlined, of austerity, Brexit and managing relationships in a five-party coalition. Then we were hit by the pandemic. It is, I think, recognised that all parties in the Executive have performed admirably.

Mr O'Toole raised the idea, as did Mike Nesbitt and John O'Dowd, of a fiscal commission. I have said many times that I support that idea. A commitment to a fiscal council is also made in various agreements. The Department has suspended an awful lot of activity, as have all Departments, including some of what was to be developed under NDNA, in order to meet the immediate challenges. Over the past number of weeks, we have been getting back to picking up those pieces of work, including the piece relating to a commission. Those are big debates, as John O'Dowd and Mike Nesbitt said.

Interestingly, when Mike, a former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, talked about whether we had the maturity to handle these matters and take these decisions, I cast my mind back to one of his predecessors, Reg Empey, who made exactly the same comments when we were debating the transfer of policing and justice powers to the Assembly: perhaps the Assembly did not have the maturity to handle those issues. For those who have been here long enough, I contend that the Department of Justice has probably been one of the least controversial Departments since those powers were transferred. Sometimes, we have to back ourselves and test ourselves to see whether we are able to manage these things.

Matthew O'Toole's final point was about local media. I have been considering that matter and will give it urgent consideration. I recognise the problems that he and others have raised with me. Our local media play an important role, and we want to see how it is possible to ensure that they get support. We are looking at that issue.

Andrew Muir raised the issue of multi-year budgets. Of course, we have expressed the desire to get to that point. It will require the outcome of the spending review.

The spending review was to have happened over the course of the summer in Westminster and Whitehall, but it is now happening, we are told, in the autumn. That will give us a clear position as to how we can move towards all that.

3.15 pm

Pat Catney is gone now but he asked about the sureties of having a further Budget Bill. As I said, I have committed to that and to much more in-depth scrutiny by Committees in the run-up to that Budget Bill in the early autumn. I give him that assurance.

Rachel Woods and Gerry Carroll made similar points. Rachel has left the Chamber. It does not matter how often I repeat it, it does not seem to have landed that, when we agreed the Budget on 31 March, which was set pre-pandemic, and we voted on a Vote on Account to allocate some money to allow Departments to spend for a set period, the experience of the pandemic means that some of that money may run out earlier than could be given to the Bill. It was necessary to bring in a device. This exercise, over the last number of weeks, has simply been a technical device to make sure that Departments have

money. It is not a full-scale Budget, nor is it a response to the pandemic. It is not a new departure in supporting fair, balanced and green economic recovery. This is the Budget that we agreed on 31 March, that was set pre-pandemic, so it took no account of what we were facing into. We are simply voting to allocate more money in that regard.

If there is a genuine misunderstanding, I am happy to repeat that. It was never intended to be the Budget that you are looking for or, indeed, that Mr Carroll has criticised. I hope that, in the last telling of the tale of this piece of legislation, people finally understand that this is simply a device to allow us to spend more money and ensure that Departments do not run out of money. A Budget that we agreed pre-pandemic could not possibly respond to the situation of the pandemic.

The Executive will discuss economic recovery, and we will try to develop our plans as best we can with the resources that we have. There may be more available. We will bring ideas, such as the ones debated yesterday, to that discussion on economic recovery, so that it is fair, green and set in a way that can give hope to people and support to those who, undoubtedly, will be faced with economic hardship as a consequence of the pandemic. Those are the arguments that, as one party of five parties in the Executive, we will bring to the table. I hope to hear the arguments from other Ministers.

I have tried to respond to as many of the issues as possible. They have been very varied over the course of the several debates on the legislation. Nonetheless, there has been a significant debate on the Bill and the associated Supply Resolution. It is imperative that the legislation debated today completes its passage through the Assembly to secure the cash and resources needed, so that public services can be delivered, as we begin hopefully to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

I ask Members to support the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, cross-community support is required.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Question will be put again in three minutes. Members should continue to uphold social distancing, and those who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

Before I put the Question, I remind Members that, if possible, it would be preferable if we could avoid a Division.

Question put a second time.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 5/17-22] do now pass.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)

Committee Business

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to resume their seats. Thank you. The next item of business is a motion from the Committee for Justice to extend the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 15 October 2020, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill [NIA Bill 03/17-22].

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Justice, Mr Paul Givan, to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Givan: The Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill began on 29 April 2020. The Bill consists of 28 clauses and covers a range of issues, including the creation of a new domestic abuse offence that focuses on non-physical abusive behaviour, including coercive or controlling behaviour; domestic abuse aggravators for sentencing, including where a child is involved; prevention of cross-examination of witnesses by persons who are accused of domestic abuse in criminal proceedings and family proceedings; special measures for the protection of witnesses in domestic abuse proceedings; and the prohibition of a person who is charged with domestic abuse to the right to trial by jury.

As outlined during Second Stage, the Bill is an essential piece of legislation. On 28 April, I referred to the Police Service statistics for 2019, which indicated that the level of recorded domestic abuse incidents in Northern Ireland, which included 18,033 domestic abuse crimes, was the highest of any 12-month period since 2004-05. The number of crimes had increased by 14.8% on the previous 12 months, and made up 16.9% of all police-recorded crime. Do not forget that those figures reflect only the incidents that were actually reported.

3.30 pm

At that time, fears were expressed that, during the COVID-19 lockdown, victims would become more isolated and vulnerable and that instances of domestic violence and abuse would increase. Unfortunately, those fears have been realised. There have been three domestic homicides since lockdown. The PSNI published statistics for weekly calls in relation to domestic abuse, indicating that, for the week beginning 20 May, a total of 636 calls were received, the normal average being 570. The Minister, when she attended the Committee meeting on the 30 April, also outlined that calls to the helpline had substantially increased and covered a range of issues, including physical, sexual and verbal abuse, emotional abuse, coercive control, rape and child sex abuse. Women's Aid is also very concerned that the increased volume of calls has not been reflected in referrals and that victims are not accessing the support and assistance that they

desperately need. Home is definitely not the safe haven that the majority of people take for granted. The recent lockdown has only emphasised the need for the Bill.

The Committee has issued a call for evidence through media notices in the main newspapers and on the Assembly website. It has also written to a wide range of organisations and key stakeholders, inviting their comments and views to assist with scrutiny of the Bill. A communications plan, focused on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, has also been implemented, with the aim of reaching the widest possible range of organisations and individuals not already captured by other methods.

There is clearly wide public interest in the Bill. The Committee has already received a number of written submissions from organisations and correspondence and emails from victims of domestic abuse, male and female, outlining their personal experiences and their experiences of the justice system. We particularly welcome and appreciate the contact from victims, as we recognise how difficult it must be for them, first, to make contact with the Committee and then to recount their often horrific experiences. It is, however, those experiences that emphasise the need for the legislation and the need to get it right.

The closing date for written submissions is the end of this week. We expect to receive a substantial volume of evidence on the Bill by that point. The Committee will take oral evidence on the Bill from next week. We will want, in particular, to explore how the legislation enhances legislation already in place and whether it fully addresses the gaps in existing law and improves the ability of the justice agencies to prosecute domestic abuse cases; whether the new offence is adequate and whether there are likely to be any issues regarding investigation and prosecution of it; whether the reasonable defence provision is framed appropriately and that the intent of when it could be used is clear and unambiguous; whether the penalties in the Bill are appropriate and adequate and whether there are other approaches, legislative or non-legislative, to tackling domestic abuse that are not currently in place that should be taken forward in the Bill, in another piece of legislation, or by other means.

The Committee intends to undertake detailed, careful scrutiny of the Bill, and, despite the limitations caused by the current circumstances and the continued need to adhere to social-distancing requirements, we will take evidence from key stakeholders and, most importantly, hear the views of victims of domestic abuse to ensure that the legislation is as robust and effective as possible.

Mindful of the need to ensure that the Bill becomes law sooner rather than later, given the urgent need for it, we will not take any more time than is necessary. At our meeting on 30 April, members agreed to seek an extension to the Committee Stage until 15 October 2020. That extension will enable the Committee to assist in ensuring that, hopefully, the Bill can be enacted before the end of the year, but, most importantly, that it will provide the time and opportunity for those who have suffered domestic abuse, and those who provide support and assistance to them, to have a voice in shaping the final outcome and so that the Committee can give the Bill the detailed scrutiny that it merits and make sure that it meets the specific needs of Northern Ireland and that we get it right.

The Committee will report to the Assembly on the Bill as soon as possible within the proposed timescale of no later than 15 October 2020. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No one else in the Chamber has indicated that they wish to speak on the issue. Strictly speaking, the Chairperson of the Committee could be called to make a winding-up speech on the debate, but I do not think that that will be necessary.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 15 October 2020, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill [NIA Bill 03/17-22].

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their leave for a few minutes so that there can be a change of personnel in the audiovisual unit. We will then continue with the business in the Order Paper. Just to be clear, you have about 10 minutes to kill. Thanks.

The House took its ease from 3.35 pm to 3.45 pm.

3.45 pm

Private Members' Business

EU Withdrawal Transition Period: Extension

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on the extension of the European Union withdrawal transition period.

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move.

That this Assembly notes its unique role as a named party to the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement and the unique impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland; further notes the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and the extreme challenges facing businesses and workers; and calls on the UK Government to request, and the European Union to agree, an extension of the current Brexit transition period beyond 31 December 2020 in order that businesses have adequate time to prepare for the implementation of new arrangements.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published in the Marshalled List.

Mr O'Toole: For the past four years, Northern Ireland has been at the centre of an enormous diplomatic and political dilemma. The UK's exit from the European Union was always going to profoundly and uniquely affect our region. The EU is an organisation whose aim is peacebuilding but whose means are deepened economic integration and legal obligation across member states. Those are technocratic terms, but what it amounted to was breaking down borders and creating connection between people and places. Nowhere is that sense of connection more important than in Northern Ireland. We are a place defined not just by division but by being connected to two jurisdictions and, indeed, two nations, being in two places at once: on the island of Ireland but not in the Irish state; in the British state but not on the island of Britain. Our society is shaped by these complexities and contradictions, as is this institution, which is specifically designed to accommodate our uniquely complex society. Managing that complexity was always going to be an enormous challenge during the Brexit process, and so it proved, but despite being at the centre of that debate, we were absent from it.

For the vast majority of the past four years, the Northern Ireland Assembly has not been sitting to scrutinise or debate what was happening in the Brexit process, even when it so obviously affected the lives and livelihoods of all the people whom we represent, and there was no Northern Ireland Executive to make representations on behalf of people here, even when our future was the most talked about issue in European politics. If anyone is in any doubt that a functioning Executive and Assembly might have made a difference, they should look to one of the most rational and balanced documents produced in Northern Ireland on Brexit. It was a letter dated 10 August 2016 and co-signed by the then First Ministers, Arlene Foster and Martin McGuinness. Despite the subsequent differences that arose in our parties, that document set out a clear set

of asks from the UK Government, most notably that the Northern Ireland Executive:

"be fully involved and represented in the negotiations".

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, suffice to say we were not.

Our institution's absence from the stage could hardly have been timed worse. The Assembly collapsed in January 2017. That was just two months before article 50 was triggered. We did not return here until after the UK Parliament had ratified the withdrawal agreement, and barely three weeks before the UK would leave the European Union. Not only were we not at the races, we gave our wallet to a gambler to spend as he pleased. Well, we are here now, better late than never.

That brings me to the substance of today's motion. We are now too late to stop Brexit. The UK, including Northern Ireland, has left the European Union. I bitterly regret that that is the case and I hope that, in the future, before I get too old, we will have the opportunity to rejoin it. We did, after all, vote to remain, but let me be absolutely clear, that is not what today is about. This is not about rerunning the debates of the referendum or the subsequent three years, it is about where we are now. Where we are now is in the midst of not just the greatest global health emergency of our lifetimes, but entering into what could be the deepest recession in recorded history. The Congressional Budget Office in the United States estimated yesterday that COVID-19 could cost the US economy \$8 trillion — trillion — over the next decade. To put that in context, the total size of the UK economy in 2019 was around \$3 trillion. There are no precedents for what is about to happen to our economy and our society.

Currently, the UK, like most developed economies, including the Republic of Ireland, is paying to deep freeze a large section of its economy and its workforce in the expectation that economic activity can be safely restarted over the coming weeks and months. The Executive, as with Governments all over the world, are undertaking similar experiments, and that is what they are: experiments. No one knows how much demand remains for services and goods that have been shut down for months. No one knows whether entire sectors of our economy will even be able to operate within social-distancing guidelines. No one knows what proportion of the workforce will be in self-isolation at any one time, having been in contact with a positive case. Those are all unknowns. They are common to every country battling COVID-19 and seeking to deal with the profound economic consequences, but only one country is holding open the option of rupturing its biggest trading relationship in the middle of this crisis.

The UK Government insists that it will not extend the Brexit transition period beyond the end of this year. Let us be clear what the transition period is. It is not EU membership; it is a holding position that maintains the practical economic benefits of membership until a new relationship can be agreed. The UK's chief negotiator, David Frost, as well as multiple senior Ministers, in particular Michael Gove, have insisted that it would be unthinkable to extend the transition period and that the UK should exit that transition on 31 December this year, whether there is a new UK-EU trade deal or not. That is mad. It is a bit like driving 30 miles to test your eyesight: it is mad and it is dangerous. It is especially dangerous because we know how close

we came, in recent weeks, to serious disruption to supply chains across these islands. If we end this year with no trade deal and no extension to the transition, we could face the very real prospect of significant disruption to supply chains, not just between Calais and Dover but between Holyhead and Dublin — a route that is critical to the Northern Ireland market — and at Belfast and Larne. As I and my colleagues have raised repeatedly, it could prevent us from doing essential cross-border contact tracing because we will need a UK-EU data equivalence regime to share information in real time on people who are crossing, for example, back and forth between Derry and Donegal.

I have not yet dwelt on the detail of the Ireland protocol. The protocol offers, in my view, vital protections to Northern Ireland, but real commitments, including financial commitments, need to be made by the UK Government to enable the Executive and other parties to implement the protocol in a way that works for businesses and workers here. The best way to make a burden of that protocol is for the UK to crash out of the transition period without businesses being given adequate time to make preparations, because that protocol will still be binding on the UK whether it leaves without a transition extension or not. The protocol is there in black and white and will have to be implemented. If we want it to work in the smoothest way possible, and I hope that everyone in the Chamber does, as the Agriculture Minister says he does, the last thing that we need is to crash out of the transition period at the end of this year.

Some will say, "What is the point of this motion? Boris Johnston and his gang will do whatever they want. Stormont is irrelevant". Except that last part is not true. At the insistence of Boris Johnston's Government, the Northern Ireland Assembly is a named party to the withdrawal agreement. That is unique. The Scottish Parliament is not mentioned; the Welsh Assembly is not mentioned; Dáil Éireann is not mentioned; the Bundestag is not mentioned; but we are.

The treaty says that the Northern Ireland Assembly must have a say on the continuation of the Ireland protocol, and the Command Paper that was published by the British Government, just a fortnight ago, said that the Northern Ireland Assembly was critical to the implementation of the protocol and, by extension, Brexit itself. How can our voice be central to the implementation of the protocol but irrelevant to whether the UK crashes out of the transition, when that crash out will, itself, be the biggest determinant of how the protocol is implemented?

Whether you are Remain or Leave, whether you are in favour of, or opposed to, the protocol, I ask all Members to consider whether their constituents deserve the consequences of a crash out of the transition at the end of this year, in the middle of the biggest global health crisis that any of us have lived through. For too long, during the past four years, the Assembly was silent while things were decided for the people whom we are elected to represent. Now that we have our voice back, let us use it. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Miss Woods: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "facing" and insert:

"all sections of society and the economy; and calls on the UK Government to request, and the European Union to agree, an extension of the current Brexit

transition period beyond 31 December 2020 in order that Northern Ireland is given adequate time to rebuild and prepare for the implementation of new arrangements."

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. After that, all other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. I ask you to open the debate on your amendment.

Miss Woods: First, I want to thank the SDLP Members for tabling the motion. The simple fact that should not be forgotten throughout the debate is that the global health emergency arising from the pandemic has understandably forced Governments around the world to focus their attention, priorities and resources towards tackling COVID. The workload for Ministers and Governments is significant, and we have acknowledged that throughout. We also know that the Executive's response to the pandemic has been in the form of society-wide restrictions and an economic shutdown that has caused and will cause further damage and hardship for all our citizens.

Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre predicts that economic output could fall by as much as 9.6% in 2020 and estimates that roughly 235,000 workers have been either temporarily laid off or furloughed. Analysis from Ernst and Young notes an approximate 6.7% contraction in the NI economy and 78,000 job losses. The most recent survey from the NI Chamber of Commerce suggests that around three in five businesses have experienced a significant fall in income, with most down to their last six months of cash reserves. The Bank of England estimates that we will be in the worst recession in 300 years. I am sure that Members will agree that all that paints a very bleak picture for us and, as many continue to point out, even in the most optimistic scenarios, there will be no return to business as usual. There will be significant changes in consumer behaviour and investment, and employment will continue on its negative trend.

The additional shock of Brexit and the looming friction in trade and the burden that it will place on business here is not welcome. In fact, it is completely reckless. The impact of COVID-19 is not only felt in economic terms, nor is the damage that will be caused by Brexit. Our amendment to the motion seeks to recognise that calls to extend the transition period must take account of the shock waves that the COVID-19 crisis has sent through our entire society and the fact that Northern Ireland, as a whole, is not ready or adequately prepared for the protocol coming into effect in January.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. In giving way, she enables me to say something that I omitted to say in my speech: my party will support the amendment and we are grateful to the Green Party for tabling it. It adds to the motion.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention and his comments.

In a report that was published yesterday by the House of Lords EU Select Committee, the grim reality, endless uncertainties and serious challenges that the Brexit cliff edge poses for Northern Ireland are laid out in black and white. It states:

“The combination of uncertainty, lack of momentum and lack of time, compounded by the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a potent threat to economic prosperity and political stability in Northern Ireland.”

The reality is that we are months away from the Northern Ireland protocol coming into effect and we still have no detail on how it will work. The fact remains that all necessary resources and work involved in preparing for it has been lost or sidelined due to the pandemic. The report notes the contradiction that lies at the heart of the protocol, that:

“Article 4 states that Northern Ireland is part of the customs territory of the UK”

while

“Article 5 ... applies the entirety of EU customs legislation, including the Union Customs Code, to Northern Ireland.”

Still, we have no clarity on how new processes for goods moving between NI and GB will be managed and what the impact will be on the costs. Are we moving to a situation in which goods will cost more for people living in Northern Ireland, which will be coupled with our lower wages and higher poverty rates, never mind the impeding recession because of COVID?

The Northern Ireland Retail Consortium and the Northern Ireland business network have expressed frustration at the lack of engagement and have outlined how onerous, expensive and hugely damaging such checks could be to businesses here. As was rightly pointed out yesterday during the debate on economic recovery, what is harmful to the economy is damaging to society as a whole. If business models prove economically unviable under the new arrangements, it will have serious knock-on effects. We are not just talking about businesses here: we must also speak about livelihoods, families and the pressure on public services, health, education and our environment.

4.00 pm

The protocol also addresses issues such as the rights of individuals, the common travel area, the single electricity market and North/South cooperation. The refusal to grant the EU's request to open an office in Belfast is a refusal by the Tories to ensure that Northern Ireland is adequately protected throughout the processes of implementing the protocol and that both sides in the withdrawal agreement fulfil their promises.

Once again, as my colleague Clare Bailey pointed out in the Chamber in February, we are being held hostage to the fortunes of a Prime Minister who this House does not trust, and who is putting flawed, ideological rhetoric ahead of the well-being of our citizens.

Most remarkably, we have a party in the Executive — the DUP — that follows him blindly into the chaos while the rest of us despair. DUP MPs in Westminster voted for regressive immigration legislation that would severely limit the number of people who could come to live and work in Northern Ireland and contribute to our economy and society. This is the same legislation that the Minister for the Economy acknowledged would cause serious difficulties for the agri-food industry and hospitality sector here, in an answer to my question for written answer.

DUP MPs in Westminster also voted in favour of legislation that deliberately excluded minimum standards on food post-Brexit — an absolutely shocking move, with the Agriculture Bill described by former MEP Jim Nicholson as, potentially, the last nail in the coffin for agriculture in Northern Ireland. We have no indication if Minister Poots will follow the lead of other devolved Administrations that have made provision to develop agriculture legislation that addresses their own needs.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. As I understand it, this debate is about whether we need more time to negotiate with the European Union, whereas what the Member is doing is criticising decisions that have already been made.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention but this is all part of the debate, and I will continue to get to my point of why we need the transition period extended.

So, that, surely, must be done before the end of the transition period in order to keep our hard-fought standards and protections in place and build on them. Of course, we learned yesterday that the DUP refused a proposal to the Executive to call for an extension to the transition period. That is not surprising, given the examples that I mentioned. It appears that they are more concerned about the fanciful dream of leaving the EU than the evidence staring us all in the face that Northern Ireland is on the brink, and that this crisis that we are all facing will be compounded by an even bigger one if we do not act now.

At the end of April, we learned that the Brexit subcommittee was scrapped, presumably because of urgent decisions that needed to be progressed while the COVID crisis engulfed all government business, and that policies and approaches are now discussed in private at the Executive table. How, then, is the Assembly able to properly scrutinise and provide genuine suggestions and recommendations around the issues of the protocol and Brexit, and their implication for Northern Ireland?

The subcommittee was also part of the NDNA agreement but now it is gone. Where is it? Where is the impact assessment that we were promised? Is this an example of dodging difficult questions and scrutiny?

We are several weeks away from a deadline when the British Government have the opportunity to call for an extension to the transition period. We should follow the other devolved Administrations and send a clear signal to Westminster that Northern Ireland needs that time to recover from the pandemic and prepare for the protocol coming into effect. We are the region most affected and most inextricably intertwined with the negotiations, and, so far, the Executive have done the least of all the devolved regions in calling for such an extension.

It is not just businesses suffering as a result of COVID-19, and it is not just businesses that will need to prepare for new arrangements arising out of Brexit. We must recognise the difficulties and uncertainties that exist across society in terms of domestic violence and abuse, mental health, social care and many others. We must not see any reductions in rights standards or protections. If required, the Executive must step up and bring forward legislation before the transition period ends.

I urge all Members to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. From this point on, Members will have five minutes in which to speak.

Mr Storey: Sir Francis Bacon once said that reading maketh a broad man, speaking a ready man, and writing an exact man. That forces you to read what people have written, and, in doing so, gives you a sense of where they are really coming from.

Despite all of the words in the motion and the amendment, it brings us back to the salient point: that there are those who are still opposed to us leaving the undemocratic and overly bureaucratic European Union. They will stop at nothing to overturn the democratic decision of the people of the United Kingdom over four years ago to leave the European Union. In the motion and the amendment, they have decided to employ the COVID-19 crisis and to use it as a mask to cover their real intention, which is to deny the democratic wish of the UK as exercised through the ballot box.

I say to the Member who proposed the motion that, despite his coming from a party that claims they were the advocates of democracy — one man, one vote and recognising the ballot paper and all of that — it seems that now you can set all of that aside when it does not suit and the outcome you wanted is not what you got. Members also need to recognise that they are not alone in that regard, because we have seen EU negotiators and their supporters ruthlessly exploiting the current global crisis, particularly in relation to economies that are in meltdown. They use the same flawed arguments as we have already heard in the Chamber this afternoon.

Why would the EU not want further delay? Of course, it would mean one thing: that the United Kingdom would continue to pay. The Paymaster General has decided to leave the club. That is why Europe was in such a quandary and in such a political tizzy when the democratic wish of the United Kingdom was expressed via the ballot box. The UK Paymaster General has also decided to take away the chequebook that Europe would like us to continue using because they would like us to still contribute to their coffers.

It also means that the UK cannot benefit from any free trade deals that it wants to engage in. What we have heard is a panacea of doom, worry and fear, rather than grasping the opportunities of being unshackled from a system that is undemocratic and riddled with inconsistencies and inappropriate financial behaviour.

It has to be remembered that an extension to the transition period could cost the United Kingdom Government somewhere in the region of £380 billion. Of course, there are those who believe that all you have to do is just to ask for more money and you will get it; the bigger the bowl, the bigger the receipt. However, there are consequences of an extension and there would be consequences if we were not to fulfil the obligation.

An extension to the transition period would prevent us from taking the radical steps needed to rebuild the post-COVID-19 economy because the United Kingdom would continue to be bound by EU rules and unable to influence them. What is more ludicrous than for Members who talk about scrutiny, getting more information and having more detail, when rules would be made in Brussels that could not be changed in Belfast. Therefore, —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: — there is much more that we could say about this issue. We will be opposing the amendment and the motion. I look forward to the completion of our removal from the European Union.

Ms Anderson: Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin agus i bhfabhar an leasaithe fosta. I stand to speak in favour of the motion and the amendment. The majority in this Assembly do not support Brexit. The majority in the North do not support Brexit, and yet in just under seven months' time, the British Government are prepared to drag us over a Brexit cliff. The Irish protocol in the withdrawal agreement is, without doubt, an ugly compromise, but, ugly as it is, it will stop a harder border on the island of Ireland.

Brexit and partition are also ugly impositions put on the shoulders of the majority of the people in Ireland against our will. Brexit is stripping away our democratic rights, and the partition of Ireland is the reason for that, yet Brexit has accelerated a new dynamic into the conversation about Irish unity. I acknowledge the EU Council's statement and contribution that it made on the political momentum for change and for ending partition and advancing Irish unity. On 29 April 2017, the EU Council said that, in the event of reunification, the whole of Ireland will remain in the EU. I acknowledge the work undertaken in the EU to protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, with article 2(1) of the protocol stating that there will be no diminution of Good Friday Agreement rights.

Our communities, our businesses and our people are battling with COVID-19. That is the reality. They are not even slightly prepared for what could hit us at the end of this year. Even the most fanatical Brexiteers know that. So, we need an extension to the transition period. The clock is ticking, because such an extension needs to be agreed by the Joint Committee in four weeks' time.

Many businesses will be shocked as they battle to come to terms with border control posts and custom checks in the Irish Sea because they are simply going to happen. There has been no preparation or work to help businesses to deal with all that.

People in the North will suffer from bill shock, as they will be paying for roaming charges post-transition. Community organisations the length and breadth of the North, whether they come from the Shankill or from Galliagh, women's groups and other organisations will see £3.5 billion of European funding lost to the North. Workers from across Europe who have made the North their home enrich our society, bring skills and talent, but Brexit has left them feeling unwanted and unwelcome, compounded, I have to say, by comments, some carelessly made even by authors of this motion. People feel unwanted and unwelcome and are leaving.

If we are fortunate enough to live through this deadly pandemic with an economy that has, thus far, been hit with the equivalent of three economic recessions, the last thing that we need is to go over a Brexit cliff on 1 January 2021. We need an extension, and it would be absolutely foolish not to allow people to prepare for a border in the Irish Sea.

The Scottish and Welsh Governments have both called for an extension. The EU chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, has said that the EU is prepared to offer an extension up to 2022. So, let us grab the opportunity for our society, for our business, for our workers, for our environment — and I know that Philip McGuigan is very much focused on the

impact that it will have on our environment — and, most of all, for all our people. For all those reasons and many many more that I could go into, we support both the motion and the amendment before us today.

Dr Aiken: We in the Ulster Unionist Party cannot support the motion or the amendment.

While we understand the desire of the SDLP and the Green Party to raise these issues, after the Executive's discussions yesterday, when it was unanimously decided to wait until this current phase of negotiations has played out, we feel that, at this stage, rather than debating this, we should be debating the reality of the Irish Sea border. That was the basis of our amendment, which was, regrettably, not taken by the Speaker. Today's discussions will only be seized on and utilised by those who wish to seek bargaining advantage between Mr Frost and Mr Barnier and those who seek to maintain further material advantage at the expense of everyone in Northern Ireland.

4.15 pm

The UUP recognises that today marks the start of a critical phase of the negotiations between the UK and the EU. Those are discussions where the future economic and social well-being of Northern Ireland are purportedly central to the outcome of any agreement that may or may not be made. We note that in the ensuing debate over the last four years, although regrettably not in the Assembly, a common theme has always placed the Belfast Agreement as the main feature of all discussions. Indeed, the interpretation of the principles of that agreement are what all actors have said is the driving force of their deliberations with respect to maintaining as minimalist an impact as possible on Northern Ireland and its economy. Regrettably, this is a form of code speak that disguises the more realistic assessment that, compared to the level playing field, financial passports, modified movements, security and fisheries, Northern Ireland is unfortunately but a mere bargaining chip in these discussions. That is as regrettable as it is inevitable. Indeed, if the Assembly votes to pass this motion with cross-community consent, it is certain that that position would be utilised as another part of that discussion. Regardless of what some Members may think, compared to EU members' national priorities, the interests of Northern Ireland will not be put to the fore.

Indeed, with the lack of detail on the derogation of what is deemed an at-risk good, the overriding and primary jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union, our having to remain part of the union customs code and all that that entails, the technical and environmental regulations, VAT and excise, the single electricity market and state aid, all coupled with the primacy of EU executive agencies within Northern Ireland, it has been admitted by the UK Government that the European Court still has more jurisdiction over the UK with respect to Northern Ireland than it has over the member states, which is to say on infringement proceedings and the ability to fine. That will give unelected EU officials considerable power that we, as an Assembly, will have no say over. It will bring a very real threat of a Northern Ireland business that is trading exclusively within our UK market having goods described by an EU official as "at risk" and being hauled in front of the European Court of Justice without any recourse to appeal to our United Kingdom Supreme Court.

This also raises the issue of when we will debate these issues. When will we be briefed on differential VAT requirements, the implications of state aid rules or the impact of the so-called level playing-field, when any EU country will be able to challenge our Northern Ireland Executive's decision on, for instance, reduced VAT on tourism or air passenger duty without any recourse outside an unelected and unaccountable joint committee?

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: Certainly.

Mr Beggs: Any talk of extension of the Northern Ireland and UK's remaining in Europe will occur after the UK people and Parliament have voted to leave. As such, the UK budgetary rebate has come to an end already and any such decision would be very costly. Does the Member agree with me that, rather than continuing to kick the can down the road, the negotiators should be getting in there and minimising the bureaucracy that is going to land on Northern Ireland business and cost our consumers in the future?

Dr Aiken: Yes indeed, and thank you very much indeed for —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Aiken, you have an additional minute.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed.

So much for taking back control. The costs of all of these will be significant. The reality of attacks on goods coming into Northern Ireland from the rest of our own country — a Tesco-Asda tax, if you will — whereby like-for-like goods will be more expensive here will be a permanent reminder to some parties of the folly of supporting both Brexit and Boris Johnson's totally worthless reassurances. That no paperwork can be translated into electronic declarations definitely belies some recent assertions that the end of the transition period will result in a cost- and regulation-free option. I do not think that that is ever going to happen.

Rather than debating those issues today, we are talking about a motion that, if passed, means all parties in the Executive will have decided to look at this again when some actual detail is known. We should instead be asking our Executive and, in particular, the Executive Office and Agriculture, Finance and Economy Departments to tell us in detail what the likely mitigation factors are, what we will need and how we will pay for them; the cost of bespoke customs and declaration systems; the compensation and regulation costs for consumers; recruitment and training costs; and all the excess regulations that we have. In short, we need a comprehensive plan, delivered by all the Executive parties, on preparing for the oncoming end of the transition period.

Rather than debating and raising expectations on a highly improbable outcome, we should wait until we see the shape of the outcome of the talks and, then, dependent on those talks, decide what our approach should be. Today was, unfortunately, a wasted opportunity. We will not support the motion or amendment.

Mr Blair: I rise on behalf of Alliance to support the timely and relevant motion and the amendment. I thank those responsible for bringing them forward. At the outset, I assure you that I have no intention of making any attempt to rehearse Leave versus Remain arguments, because,

as I am sure that all of us agree, this is not a Leave versus Remain debate. This debate is centered on how we address very serious and imminent problems.

The challenging time frame of just one year to negotiate a comprehensive free trade agreement has been made impossible by the onset of coronavirus. No one takes any comfort from that position. We know that the UK and Irish Governments, the three devolved Assemblies and the EU have rightly diverted their focus and resources into dealing with this crisis and emergency, leaving an extensive list of questions surrounding Brexit unanswered, and that too is a reality. Yet time has continued to pass, and self-imposed deadlines loom ever closer.

An extension to the transition period is, therefore, essential to ensure that any systems and mechanisms put in place are workable and have been thought out and scrutinised to the best of our collective ability. The decisions should not be made on the basis of rushed-through processes during the time of an unprecedented public health crisis. They should be considered carefully.

There has been much commentary already about the compelling economic and social reasons why the transition period should be extended, but today I will focus on specifics within the agriculture, environment and rural affairs brief that I cover for my party. I assure Members across the House that I raise these issues for no reason other than that they are questions that I have raised many times and to which I have received very few or no answers or clarification at all. These concerns centre mainly around infrastructure at our ports, migrant labour and the future of fishing rights.

The UK's approach to the Northern Ireland protocol, published last month, finally acknowledged that new infrastructure will be required to check goods coming into Northern Ireland from Great Britain. The need for that new infrastructure at our ports had been apparent, it seems, to basically everyone, for some time, yet the UK Government have left it to only a few months before the end of the transition period to even acknowledge that necessity. The fact that we do not have any detail whatsoever on how those checks will work in practice is also extremely concerning. Businesses in Northern Ireland have no clarity on the administrative burden that is about to be placed on them. We simply need that extension to the transition period to ensure that any checks put in place work effectively and efficiently, without further disrupting east-west trade.

Additionally, we are just one month away from the deadline of 1 July, detailed in the political declaration, to secure an agreement on fishing rights. Again, that is incredibly problematic for the Northern Ireland fishing industry, and, again, there has been no clarity at all on local fishing boundaries. For example, at what point in Carlingford lough does a fishing trawler pass from UK waters into Irish or EU waters? At what point in the Irish Sea does that happen? A question that I have raised a number of times, including on the Floor of the House, is this: what are the practical difficulties of moving from one jurisdiction to five or, if you include the Isle of Man, to six? The clock is ticking and no answers are being provided to those questions. An extension to the transition period, therefore, is the course of action that will ensure a fair and sensible solution to fishing rights in the post-Brexit era.

Lastly, we need further assessment of the impact that the UK Government's proposed post-Brexit immigration system will have on our vital agri-food industry. The high wage threshold and the very dubious classifications of migrant workers into "skilled" and "unskilled" workers could have a severe impact on our economy. Alliance is committed to seeking special mitigations for Northern Ireland in any Brexit scenario. Immigration policy simply must take our local circumstances into account. Extending the transition period therefore allows us the breathing space to craft an immigration system that is fair to migrants and to each region of the UK rather than pursuing hastily arranged legislation that is based on someone else's Little Englander philosophy.

To conclude, the impact of coronavirus has damaged Government planning and left us with a series of unanswered questions regarding the Northern Ireland protocol and post-Brexit structures. Extending the transition period will give us time and breathing space to create mechanisms to minimise any negative impact of leaving the EU and reduce economic and social disruption. Therefore, I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Frew: I am probably the most pro-European MLA in this Chamber. I love Europe: I love its peoples, I love its history and I am fascinated by its architecture. I love Europe. It is because I am so pro-European that I am, by design, so anti-EU. What the EU will choose to become is a question that no one in this Chamber can answer.

Fair play to the SDLP, because throughout its history it has been very pro-EU and, before that, pro the Common Market. I suggest that even some SDLP Members cannot answer and grapple with the question of what the EU will become. It is already a bureaucratic giant; how will that ever be conducive to, and good for, democratic processes on the continent of Europe? It is beyond me.

My natural home in politics is libertarianism, which is not to be confused with, as it has been on many occasions in this House, with liberalism. I cannot understand the logic of any libertarian supporting the beast that is the EU and its direction of travel.

I will defend the right of any MLA to bring a private Members' motion to the Assembly Chamber for debate, so you have got me there, and I will debate it graciously. I respect the SDLP as it is in its DNA to support this. I cannot help but question the motive for an extension to the transition period. Is it to try to stifle, ruin, wreck and sabotage the British negotiating stance? If it is, that would be harmful to us all.

What really takes me to the fair is the stance of the party opposite. The party opposite is the biggest anti-EU party on this island and has been throughout its history. It just so happened that its members were very quiet coming up to the referendum; very quiet indeed. Not like them; very quiet. Then, all of a sudden, when they saw the results, my goodness how they turned tail. Now their party is the biggest pro-EU party about. They try to rewrite history —.

Ms Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will give way.

Ms Anderson: You think that you understand Sinn Féin's policy position, but it is quite clear from your utterances in the Chamber that you have not got a clue. Sinn Féin critically engaged —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Excuse me, Ms Anderson, all comments should be directed through the Chair.

Ms Anderson: OK. Sinn Féin critically engages with the EU and has always done so. In fact, before the date had even been set for the Brexit referendum, Sinn Féin went on a diplomatic offensive. I led our position against Brexit along with the late Martin McGuinness. So, we were very clear about our position. We have critically engaged with the EU, and, since the referendum, lots of other delegations in the European Parliament have wanted to critically engage with the EU. So, we did something that resulted in many other delegations coming on board with our position.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

4.30 pm

Mr Frew: Yes, and, of course, interventions should be short.

The fact is that Sinn Féin sold its soul to the EU in order to create a divisive matter on this island and in Northern Ireland itself.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Mr Storey: I will be quick. Let us remember that the former president of Sinn Féin said that the backers of the EU treaty were "Thatcherites". That was the former president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, who cannot remember that he was in an illegal organisation.

Mr Frew: Yes. I cannot understand how any libertarian worth his salt could support the bureaucratic nightmare that the EU is and will become increasingly to its peoples. I am glad, for one, that the UK is getting out. The problem for this country — this nation, here in Northern Ireland — is the protocol and the damaging effect that it will have. The nature of EU's aggression towards Northern Ireland is such that it has, basically, held us hostage. It has seen the UK leaving through the door and has grabbed little Northern Ireland to use it as nothing more than a bargaining chip in the only way that the EU knows how: by negotiation. That is not a place where any of us should be.

If the most ardent Remainer in the Chamber thinks that they can prolong an exit without trying to get a settled view, once and for all, to move forward, they are only heaping more damage onto the business community and the people of Northern Ireland. That is something that I cannot ever support. We have seen the aggressive nature of the EU at its worst throughout the negotiations. That surprised me, because I would have been in favour of giving people a choice and give a referendum to the people to decide. I never thought, in my worst nightmares, that the EU's stance and aggressive nature towards this little part of the world would be so intense.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGuigan: I support the motion and the amendment. I am delighted to follow my constituency colleague, who explained the difference between libertarianism and liberalism. I assure him that nobody will ever mistake him for a supporter of liberalism.

It is indicative of the dogmatic, destructive, insular and xenophobic policies of English Tories, unfortunately supported and backed by the DUP in the House and others here, that we need to have a debate on the subject. I would have thought that an extension to the Brexit process in the context of the current coronavirus pandemic was plain common sense. The key priority for the Assembly or any other elected Chamber on this island, on the neighbouring island or, indeed, across Europe for that matter over the next few months needs to be about protecting the lives of our citizens and protecting our businesses, jobs and economy against the impacts of COVID-19, which is the worst health and economic crisis that we have faced in over 100 years. Businesses in the North are worried about their imminent futures and survival. The last thing that they need is the shock of another crisis — a Tory/DUP-made crisis that they are ill prepared for. I could add our farmers, the agri-food sector, tourism, hospitality and every other sector of society in the North to that list.

The majority of people here voted against Brexit and rightly so. There is no such thing as a good Brexit. The British Government have been reckless and cavalier about the impact of Brexit on our economy, our peace process and our society in the North from day one. That is not just my view; the report from the British House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union has found that the British Government's approach to Brexit poses a

"potent threat to economic prosperity and political stability"

in the North, unlike the rosy, sunny uplands predicted by the DUP and others.

The Irish protocol, as my colleague explained, was a hard-fought for and hard-won minimum protection against the worst elements of Brexit destruction. However, given the disdain shown by the British Government for the views of the people in the North, the full implementation of the protocol is vital. That will take time to work out for businesses to adapt and prepare for.

As Sinn Féin environment spokesperson, I am well aware of the concerns about the impact that Brexit could have on environmental protections in the North. There is a fear, as there is with all kinds of issues, that the British Government want to lower and regress from current environmental standards. The British Government have introduced the Environment Bill at Westminster in an attempt to plug the gaps in environmental protection left wide open by their Brexit debacle. It is my view and that of Sinn Féin and many local environmental activists and NGOs that the Bill marks a significant weakening of the protections and regulations currently enjoyed by EU members. Not only will we lose many EU directives and regulations, but the directives and regulations that the Bill attempts to emulate are to be enforced by a new Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) that has very weak enforcement powers. A disorderly exit could cause major environmental headaches on the island of Ireland in the absence of a clear, common rule book regarding species, emissions, water quality and hazardous waste. It is the firm view of Sinn Féin that there can be no regression from EU environmental standards or regulations of an all-Ireland nature.

As COVID-19 has clearly shown us, there are no borders on this island for viruses. The same applies to our environment. It would make no sense to have one

set of environmental protections and rules in Derry and a different set in Donegal, one set in Newry and a different set in Dundalk or even one in Dublin and another in Dunloy. There must be a shared and harmonised regulatory approach.

I thank the Members for tabling the motion and the amendment, which we will support. The people of this island, particularly in the North, need time to work through the current crisis in the best interests of all of our citizens.

Ms McLaughlin: It is fair to say that leaving the European Union has not been easy. It is also fair to say that our economy is enduring unprecedented strain due to the pandemic and that we cannot have a bounceback recovery. The economic impact of COVID is devastating. Regardless of how much Members supported Brexit, those unforeseen realities call for more time, more clarity and more preparation. There is precious little time left. Failure to agree a deal with the EU is not in the interests of those who voted "Remain" or "Leave" in the referendum.

Let us look at what we are dealing with in what is intended to be the last seven months of the transition period. The House of Lords EU Select Committee has just given its judgement on the obstacles outstanding. Its report states that Northern Ireland feels like "a pawn" in a bigger game played between the UK Government and the EU. It states:

"For Northern Ireland's people, businesses and stakeholders, the Protocol represents what one witness called a 'seismic change', and very little time is left before it becomes operational."

It is unclear what impact the protocol will have on Northern Ireland after the UK enters new trade agreements, and it is the same with EU trade agreements. It is unclear how the movement of goods will be checked, it is unclear what definition will be used to decide whether goods will, potentially, pose a risk to the EU single market and how goods will be classified as being for internal UK trade. It is unclear what declarations will be required for goods travelling from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. It is unclear how goods sent from Northern Ireland to Great Britain will have unfettered access to the GB market. It is unclear how Northern Ireland businesses will operate VAT rules for next year. It is unclear how state rules will be applied in Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, the technical adviser group that was supposed to propose alternative arrangements is in abeyance. Those are just a few of the points raised by the House of Lords Committee.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Certainly.

Mr McGrath: Does the Member agree that, given the lack of clarity that she has just detailed, there is supposed to be a joint consultative working group within the structures that we have in the North but it has not even met? It is supposed to provide feedback, expertise and understanding on what the impact of Brexit will be through to the negotiations, so that a decision can be taken in a few weeks on whether we need to exit at the end of the year. There is a lack of clarity, and we need time to get that clarity.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is entitled to an extra minute, but I warn Members not to take a minute to earn their colleagues an extra minute.

Ms McLaughlin: I agree with the Member. We are running out of time, and we have no governance or scrutiny. That seems to be a theme of the Executive, as we heard in the previous debate.

We have also had a report from the Institute for Government that makes many of the same points but says even more. It warns the UK Government that capacity has been sucked out by the COVID-19 crisis, making it difficult to negotiate with the EU. Members, I can tell you that capacity in the Northern Ireland Executive has been absorbed by COVID-19 as well and has not been concentrated in any meaningful way on what we face with Brexit. It warns that the Irish Sea border will look more like the border between England and France than the one between England and Scotland. It warns that 64 different administrations in the UK will have a role in administering the Irish Sea border. It doubts that negotiations can be completed in time, and it doubts that the border can be operational by the end of the year.

Underlying all of that, says the Institute for Government, are the core challenges. The institute says that the UK and EU negotiators see the negotiations differently. The UK wants to amend the protocol; the EU wants to agree how it is implemented. The UK trade negotiator has accepted that there will be friction in trade between the UK and the EU in order to create benefits for the UK. Many of those frictions will apply to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We hear every day of the need to take expert advice when it comes to COVID. We should take expert advice when it comes to the transition arrangements. That expert advice is clear: we have to extend the transition period. Time is now too short to resolve the vast number of technical challenges that we face.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will she accept that one of the experts who has given us advice on Europe is a Sinn Féin MEP who, in 2016, said:

"The economic and fiscal policies of the European Union have had catastrophic effects on the lives of many of its citizens."?

That is the party that tells us that Europe is a wonderful place and we never should have left it.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Member, for your intervention. I want to indicate that this is not about Brexit or Remain. This conversation is about whether we are ready, and we are not.

I agree with my colleague Matthew O'Toole. The Assembly was silent while things were decided for the people whom we represent. We now have a voice, and the motion should be approved unanimously by the Assembly. It is not in the interests of anyone, whether they voted "Remain" or "Leave" in the referendum, to have a disorganised exit. It is certainly not in the interests of wider society, workers and businesses to lay a crisis on top of the immediate one. Let us display unity today by supporting the motion. I ask the Chamber this: can we just deal with one crisis at a time?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that I have three more Members to speak, and I need to call Rachel Woods at one minute past five. There is time for everyone to get in, if we are reasonable.

Mr McAleer: I welcome the motion and commend those who tabled it. As most of us will know, the Brexit debacle has created a huge impact on the agri-food sector. As I said in yesterday's debate, we have 25,000 front-line farmers who support 48,000 people employed in the food and drinks trade across the North, a trade with a turnover last year of £4.5 billion. The sector here had already been under pressure already with the COVID crisis, and I am aware that the industry had been lobbying the Minister; indeed, we have found through the Committee and our engagements that the industry wants Brexit paused to give it more time. The motion today is in line with the overwhelming majority of the voices in the agri-food sector.

As I said yesterday, the sector is particularly vulnerable. We export 87% of the agri-food produced in the North. A good bit of it goes to Europe, and a huge amount of it goes across the water to Britain, so the implementation of this protocol is absolutely crucial. We need unfettered access to the rest of Ireland and, indeed, the EU. We also need unfettered access across the water to Britain, which is a huge market for agri-food from here.

4.45 pm

As a Member said earlier, there is a lot of uncertainty. With Britain moving away from the EU, there is uncertainty around tariffs, around VAT and around regulatory divergence. I will reflect on some comments made earlier. It is easy to blame the EU, and, led by Martina and others, we have engaged critically with the EU. It was the British Government's decision, however, to implement Brexit and to opt for regulatory divergence from the EU. They have created the possibility of additional checks at our ports here.

I refer to the technical note. It was the British Government that committed to applying in the North of Ireland annex 2 to the protocol, which relates to sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) requirements for all our agri-goods. The technical note states:

"animals, plants, and their products entering"

the North

"from either a third country or ... Britain must comply with EU SPS requirements"

The North is a unique place. The letter of August 2016 from Arlene Foster and Martin McGuinness to the then Prime Minister, Mrs May, reflected that and recognised that agriculture is one of the areas in which a special solution is needed for here. The worrying thing, however, is that there is uncertainty over access to the British market.

Most recently, the Commission's technical note made the point that the British Government should clarify whether they intend to have additional posts for the performance of controls in the North, such as at Larne, and stated that if that does not happen:

"there will be no entry point solution ... for live animals and for products of animal origin"

from across the water. That could create a:

"significant risk of disruption to the trade flows entering"

here.

There is therefore a huge challenge facing us. Whatever your view is on the EU, the situation has been brought about by the fact that the British Government decided to take us out of the EU and by the fact that the British Government decided to diverge from the regulations of the EU.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Hang on.

The DUP then undermined Theresa May's deal, which created the possibility of this regulatory border. Go ahead.

Mr Storey: The Member says that the British Government took us out. I know that his party was aligned with the policy of an Armalite in one hand and a ballot box in the other, but I thought that it had made some progress and that the ballot box had primacy. Will he accept that the United Kingdom, of which we are a part, voted to leave? That is the reason. It was not one individual but the people of the United Kingdom. Yes or no?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McAleer: Thank you for that additional minute, Mr Storey.

I represent the people of West Tyrone, where 77% people voted to remain. The vast majority of people in the North voted to remain. That is whom we represent. If you want to refer to the British Parliament, that is OK, but it was England that took us out of the EU. It was not Scotland, and it was certainly not here. Therefore, no, because we represent here. That is the most important point. We want to represent the interests of people here. Indeed, the letter from Arlene Foster and Martin McGuinness in August 2016 referenced that this is a unique place. Here is different, because of our situation. OK?

The point is that the agri-food industry wants a pause. The other big thing that is totally connected to this is the British Agriculture Bill. I know that we are talking about transition, but this so important. The British Government did not accept the food standards amendment to the British Agriculture Bill. In doing so, they have not protected Britain from the importation of low-standard goods. That again raises the question of how we are going to stop low-standard foods getting in here, as well as the question of how all of this is going to be checked. Moreover, the points-based immigration system that the Home Office has talked about recently will have a huge impact on seasonal agriculture workers.

In conclusion, I commend the motion, and we offer it our wholehearted support.

Mr Nesbitt: If there were a time to call for an extension, this would not be it, and I am glad to hear that the Executive came to that conclusion yesterday. I note that Mr Blair thinks that today's debate calling for an extension is timely. I hate to see such a bad split in the Alliance Party, so he may want to have a word with his party leader about how she behaved at the Executive yesterday.

You can have an extension. You can extend by a year or by five years, but, at some point, you will have to start making decisions, and that is my concern. Four years on, we are still the most affected but least prepared region of the United Kingdom for the withdrawal. It is not just negotiations between the UK Government and the EU, but between us and the UK Government. It is under two weeks

since the Cabinet Office published the latest periodic report on negotiations between the UK Government and the devolved administrations.

Ms McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: I will give way in a minute.

The Scottish, Welsh and the UK Government agreed in October 2017 the principles that will inform the common frameworks that will govern the UK single market after transition. Of course, we did not agree those principles because we did not have a devolved administration then, but we have had one for months now, and yet that document says that we have not agreed those principles.

I have looked at the principles, and I do not understand the problem. For example, the first thing that it says is that the common frameworks will:

“enable the functioning of the UK internal market, while acknowledging policy divergence”.

Surely, then, we need Ministers to be in those negotiations, not civil servants who can only give factual input. We need elected reps who can talk about policy. For example, elected reps who can say that because we are so dependent on air transportation — in fact, we are more dependent than any other region of the UK, outside of the Highlands and islands of Scotland — air passenger duty disproportionately and negatively impacts our economy.

The principles also deal with justice, which has cross-border elements, and with the security of the United Kingdom. Why are we going to be silent about that? For how long will we be silent?

Although the frameworks will also:

“respect the devolution settlements and the democratic accountability of the devolved legislatures”,

it says that the competence of the devolved institutions will:

“not normally be adjusted without their consent”.

Yet, section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act allows the UK Government to temporarily freeze devolved competence. In other words, they can impose regulations on us that we do not like and that could be injurious to our economy but beneficial to the rest of Great Britain. Why are we silent on this?

I give way to the Member for Foyle.

Ms McLaughlin: I just thought that I would get you an extra minute. Does the Member agree that there is a very short period of time for the UK Government to make a request for an extension of the transition period? When is a good time for the UUP to get engaged? We have four weeks left — I reckon that it is time to start talking and making your mind up.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her intervention. However, that question needs to be directed to Nichola Mallon who was a Minister at the Executive yesterday when they agreed that this is not the time.

Ms McLaughlin: That is not true.

Mr Nesbitt: Oh. Oh.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Excuse me, it is not — never — in order for a Member to say to another Member, “That is not true”. Please continue, Mr Nesbitt.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Perhaps Ms McLaughlin is privy to more information than I am about a conversation at an Executive that is supposed to be private.

The principles that we have not agreed to are not silent on the protocol. They recognise the:

“economic and social linkages between Northern Ireland and Ireland and that Northern Ireland will be the only part of the UK that shares a land frontier with the EU.”

Importantly, they also say that they will:

“adhere to the Belfast Agreement.”

Again, I ask the question: what is there to disagree with? Why have we not signed up to those principles that were agreed by everybody else in October 2017?

There is also a five-phase approach to the common frameworks, and, at phase 2, which we have hit with some of the frameworks, the:

“DA portfolio Ministers”,

who, in this case, I understand to be the Ministers of the Executive Office,

“are sighted to agree the policy direction”,

which does not appear to have happened. It continues:

“the UK Government has sought to develop a shared cross-cutting approach to the UK internal market with the Welsh Government, Scottish Government and with factual input from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.”

Why? Officials from the UK, Welsh and Scottish Governments:

“have developed a joint approach for formal Parliamentary scrutiny of frameworks”.

We have not. Why are we not being consulted by the Northern Ireland Executive?

Finally, on the protocol, we hear that the UK Government and our Executive are meeting to determine the impact on individual frameworks and the programme as a whole. This is through analysis — analysis. It is time for decisions. Yesterday, as at least two Members mentioned, the House of Lords published a 100-page report on the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol, highlighting serious contradictions in language that you would, I am sure, not hear in the House of Lords. It is time for us to get our finger out.

Ms Armstrong: As my colleague stated, the Alliance Party supports the motion and, in particular, the amendment because it extends to all society and recognises the current crisis. Alliance has made clear its position on this over a long period. Indeed, Alliance MP, Stephen Farry, raised the issue of extending the period for negotiations due to the challenges of COVID-19 at Prime Minister's Questions on 18 March.

This is not, as others said, a Leave versus Remain matter. It is about having the time for negotiations on the future UK/EU relationship. I do not understand why people think that this is a bad thing. Brexit has happened, but the deals are not yet done. One year was already a very ambitious and unrealistic timetable. With COVID-19, it is now even more challenging. The Government need to be focusing their resources on managing that crisis and its aftermath. Businesses and other stakeholders have only so much bandwidth. There are sole traders and self-employed people who have not yet received any support from the Assembly — we are still waiting for that — and charities that have not yet received finance grants. Yet we expect those people to switch their focus from surviving to planning for the withdrawal agreement and what will happen after December.

The end of the implementation period entails the end of the right to freedom of movement. That has particular implications for key aspects of our economy and society, particularly our health service and social care, at a time of extreme stress due to COVID-19. Is anybody addressing this? No.

The Government are running to a very tight timescale for agreeing their future relationship with the EU. This is about more than the economy and trade; it is also about matters such as policing and security. No deal, including no trade deal, a retreat to WTO rules or an Australia-style deal, would have a severe impact on the UK economy as a whole. The UK would be needlessly distancing itself from its nearest and most important market. Many independent economic studies, as well as the Treasury, have already indicated that this would be the most damaging scenario.

Some may argue that this presents less of a risk to Northern Ireland, given that we have the protocol and will have an ongoing relationship with the EU. However, the more distant the relationship between GB and the EU, the greater the requirement for checks and barriers in the Irish Sea. Under the protocol, checks cannot be avoided entirely. The protocol is the sad and inevitable outworking of the UK Government's decision to seek a hard Brexit. We need a UK/EU deal to mitigate the scale of the impact. Any downturn in or hit to the GB economy would have a severe impact on us in Northern Ireland.

There is a suspicion that the UK Government are determined to proceed with the current timescale and end the implementation period in order to mask the economic damage of Brexit, even one without a trade deal, in the wider recession and economic turbulence arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

I want to be very clear — this is already in the press — that Alliance and the SDLP asked for an extension at the Executive. What was voted on was a proposal to come back to this in two weeks' time. If the Executive can come back in two weeks' time, surely, this country, the people who work here and the businesses currently in financial crisis need time. Do people think that COVID-19 does not exist? Do they think that the upcoming redundancies are not real and that the people who have had to move on to universal credit because we are in such a social crisis do not exist? How can we keep piling on the problems? It is time to look at the negotiations. The EU has said that it is prepared to open a longer period of time and I say thank you to them for that.

5.00 pm

I do not know about the rest of you, but how much more pressure do you want to put our businesses under? How much more stress, how many more mental health problems, are you prepared to put on the owners of businesses? It is time to catch ourselves on. We need extra time, and we need the Government in Westminster to recognise the fact that this will have a detrimental impact here. We are in a health crisis, and we are looking at an economic crisis because of it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

I want to make a general point of order. It is an accepted convention that meetings of the Northern Ireland Executive, and what goes on at them, are private. Individual Ministers may choose not to accept that, but on the Floor of the Assembly it will be accepted. It is not appropriate for Members to reveal the details of private Executive meetings. I do not think that that —

Ms McLaughlin: Do you mind if I comment?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No, I do not want you to comment. I just want to park that there.

Ms McLaughlin: There is press —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes, it may be in the press, but what I am telling you is that Ministers may choose not to abide by the convention that Executive meetings are private, but that convention will be observed on the Floor of the House.

Mr Allister: Make no mistake. This motion is not about delaying Brexit, it is about killing Brexit. It is not about getting a more opportune time for Brexit, it is about cancelling Brexit.

To do such a thing, to delay Brexit, at this time, would be economically catastrophic because, a nation like ourselves, coming out of the incredible damage caused to our economy by COVID, would then be hit, for the next two years, with billions upon billions of financial demands from Brussels, with no say over how one cent of it is spent and, on top of that, we would lose the flexibility, the agility that our nation will need to plot a way forward economically. We would be tied into that bloc which is the most ill-suited to find novel ways of dealing with an economic crisis. The EU is so overburdened with its own bureaucracy, so stilted and rule-bound that it is the worst equipped to show agility in coming out of an economic crisis.

The United Kingdom would subject itself to that situation, over which it would have no control. What the United Kingdom needs, is an opportunity to show agility and deal with the economy in novel ways which the EU's regulations would never entertain. Therefore, I can think of no worse time to delay Brexit than this.

Of course, there is a way to avoid the need to extend, and that is to get a deal. If the EU wants to avoid a crash-out by its paymaster, the way to do it is to reach a deal. They should be mindful that they stand to lose more than we in the United Kingdom. If they want a deal, or to avoid a cliff edge, they should get down to business. This really should be make-up time for the EU. Instead of that, of course, they persist with trying to pillage our fishing industry and bind us to what they call level-playing-field commitments, which will tie our hands behind our back economically, and shape and restrict the type of trade deals that we can do. If

they want a deal, they can have a deal, but it has to be on fair terms.

The principle of Brexit remains absolutely sound and necessary. Sadly, it has been largely emasculated for us, in Northern Ireland, through the iniquitous protocol. However, the principle of Brexit remains sound. I greatly regret, I have to say, the slippage I am detecting from the DUP on the issue of the protocol.

This all, of course, started with the foolhardy letter, which Mr O'Toole referenced, in August 2016, when the First Minister and the then deputy First Minister laid the groundwork for special status and, ultimately, for this protocol. We have now reached the situation where the protocol can be implemented only with the acquiescence and the active involvement of the Executive. That presents the unionist parties in the Executive with an opportunity to thwart that. Mr Poots told me, in answer to a question, that he would be providing no infrastructure at our ports, yet, last week, he was back-peddalling and soft-peddalling and talking in the lingo of Remainers about there being an opportunity both ways. It saddens me that, instead of standing firm and recognising the ability to thwart the protocol, there now is a spirit abroad, it seems, to acquiesce. That is not serving Northern Ireland's interests well.

This is not the time to stop Brexit. This is the time to proceed with Brexit. To stop it would be fatal economically for the whole United Kingdom.

Miss Woods: I thank Members for their contributions to the debate today. I will now try to summarise the main points as best I can while making some remarks.

Mr Storey claimed that the motion and amendment are an attempt to stop Brexit. That is a complete misrepresentation. As I have said, the NI protocol is coming into effect in January next year, and the motion and our amendment are about addressing the fact that Northern Ireland is reeling from a global health crisis and is not adequately prepared.

Ms Anderson took an alternative view, speaking in favour of the motion and the amendment, and she noted that a majority in the Assembly and a majority of people in Northern Ireland do not support Brexit. She described the protocol as an "ugly compromise" and supported the request for an extension, noting the impact on the community and voluntary sector and the funding shortfall that leaving the EU will bring.

Dr Aiken questioned why we are having this debate today. He highlighted the critical phase of negotiations as well as the need for a plan, including on the cost of goods coming into Northern Ireland. Our view is that action must be taken now and that the voice of this Assembly must be heard before the deadline for extending the transition process passes. He also raised the issue of a lack of debate and scrutiny of all the issues around the Northern Ireland protocol on Brexit. We would, of course, welcome that and welcome more detail from the Executive being given to every Member of the House.

John Blair noted the significance of decisions that need to be taken and said that they should not be rushed and that the extension is needed to stop the disruption from new arrangements on fishing rights and other infrastructural issues. He also spoke about the need to avoid future

immigration systems that will be hugely damaging to Northern Ireland, and we totally support that sentiment.

Paul Frew outlined his support for Europe but questioned the motive of the motion. I say: look at the evidence and look at the forecasts. An extension is needed to limit the damage to Northern Ireland.

Mr McGuigan noted how such an extension is just plain common sense. He also outlined his concerns over environmental protections for Northern Ireland, on which there should be no regression. We completely agree with that. I would also like to point out that the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has failed to bring forward any plans for an independent environmental protection agency, which the Assembly called for earlier this year. The onus is on the Minister and his Department to ensure that there is no regression in protections.

Sinead McLaughlin outlined the reasons why we need more time and said that the unforeseen crisis and the workings around the protocol necessitate an extension. We agree. That is something that other Members have chosen to ignore. She also appealed for unity.

Mr McAleer raised his concerns about the effect of Brexit on the agri-food sector on top of the COVID pandemic, highlighting its vulnerabilities alongside the implementation of the protocol.

Mike Nesbitt then rose and shared Dr Aiken's concern over the timing of the debate. He accepts that we are the most affected and least prepared, so how can the party not support a call for more time to get ready?

Kellie Armstrong reiterated that this is not a Leave versus Remain matter, which we agree with, but said that, given our situation, the timetabling for this year is difficult for everyone, including businesses.

Jim Allister claimed that the motion is about cancelling Brexit, which, again, is a complete misrepresentation. It says nothing in the motion or amendment about preventing Brexit, and, unfortunately, he chooses, like others, to simply ignore the extreme circumstances that we face.

Many aspects of our lives have been effectively put on hold by the global health crisis. Holidays have been cancelled or rescheduled, family get-togethers have been put off and birthdays have been celebrated alone, for example.

Indeed, if elections are being delayed in some parts of the UK, that is acknowledgement that our work needs to protect the public first and foremost rather than stick to political timetables that were drawn up before COVID-19. Brexit is absolutely no exception. If the firm timeline to "Get Brexit done" is being stuck to by the Tories and others, that is to the detriment of the people, environment, community, businesses, wider society and economy of Northern Ireland. What we need is time to actually prepare for it, rather than shoot ourselves in the foot once more.

For my party, the point is still this: why, when people are trying to recover from one crisis, would we deliberately hit them with another in the form of a no-deal Brexit or arrangements that destroy livelihoods and damage communities here?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Colin McGrath to conclude and wind up the debate on the substantive motion.

Mr McGrath: I suppose that I have the easy task of trying to mop up all the views of this particular debate. I want to thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for letting us have the debate, and Members for their contributions. I appreciate that the motion calls on the UK Government to act. However, the fact that no Minister from the Executive Office felt that they could attend to respond or offer their thoughts makes me wonder whether it is a case of out of sight, out of mind. In other words, if they pretend that they do not have their divisions on Brexit, maybe those divisions do not exist.

The vote to exit the EU was in June 2016, nearly four years ago. Article 50 was triggered in March 2017, just over three years ago. In the past number of years, there have been protocols, withdrawal agreements, the pantomime in Westminster and, eventually, Boris and his majority wading through the Brexit for which the people of the North did not vote. Yet, today, four years later, we are having our first substantive debate on the matter. That debate has not been led by the Executive, but by my party, the SDLP.

The confusion and concern that exists out there in communities and businesses is palpable. Not only are people scared of the pandemic and coronavirus, but businesses and other groups in the community are fearful of the impact of Brexit. They have heard much about how funding might dry up and how new trade conditions and regulations will add days to their processes and astronomical costs to their businesses. There is real fear that many businesses will not survive. As I have said, coronavirus and its impact could not have been predicted. While people have begun to move a little, businesses have not. They have slowed up. Many have not opened up at all. If there were ever a need to stop, gather, take a breath and see where we are with regard to the economy, it is now.

The SDLP has always been and always will be, proudly, a pro-European party. We are not here to rerun the referendum debate — the people of Northern Ireland have had their say on that — but it would be remiss of me not to suggest that we may be at a better place politically if more public representatives gave weight to the counsel of people here than to the positions of voters elsewhere.

Our proposal for an extension to the transition period is not motivated by a politically partisan approach. It is designed to seek consensus in a polarised atmosphere. In the tradition of Hume, I see institutions that respected the differences and diversity of a continent that was emerging from conflict and sought to bring warring people together in the spirit of common purpose and endeavour. However, I accept that mine is not the only outlook. I have listened for years to the points that have been made by other people. Whether you are a member of Boris's Brexiteer ultras or an 'Ode to Joy'-loving Remainer, the issue that is at the heart of the debate is whether your political objective cannot be reasonably achieved in the four weeks that are left before the opportunity to extend the transition period is lost.

We already had significant concerns about the impact of Brexit on the economy. It is impossible to argue that the crisis that we face currently is immaterial to those concerns or will, in some way, be neutral. Renegotiating our relationship with our largest external trade partner at a time when the economy is about to enter significant recession on the back of the most significant public health crisis in living memory is not ambitious. This is not something that can be fuelled by the spirit of Dunkirk. It is

dangerously irresponsible and will cost the livelihoods of thousands of people.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes, of course.

Mr Allister: Does the Member not consider that the path to avoiding an extension to the transition is to get a deal? Therefore, in that regard, and bearing in mind that he represents a coastal constituency, has he any criticism to offer on the intransigence of the EU in seeking to rape and pillage our fishing waters? Has he any criticism to make of that, at least in the name of the fishermen of south Down?

5.15 pm

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will, of course, mention fishermen later in my speech. All indications are that there is no deal and that a deal is not likely. The Assembly has the opportunity, here and now, to ask for an extension. That is what we want to put on record.

The Assembly holds the unique distinction of being a named party to the withdrawal agreement. We have a responsibility, above and beyond other devolved Administrations, so it is imperative that we exercise our role, and the power of our voice, to compel London to act in the interests of those whom we represent.

I would like to take a few minutes to discuss Members' contributions. Rachel Woods in her amendment, which we will be supporting, mentions the significant impact of coronavirus on the capacity to deliver Brexit. That key point was articulated last week in evidence to the Executive Office Committee by the lead official from our Executive, Andrew McCormick. He agreed that the Department is, in all likelihood, not as ready as it could be because of the impact of Brexit. Officials have been working on other priorities, not Brexit. If they are not working on the preparations for Brexit, we may not be ready. Miss Woods also raised the significant issues that businesses will have to face. There are many, many unanswered questions, and an extension would give us the space and the opportunity to address those questions and concerns.

In his contribution, Mr Storey said that he will stop at nothing. I can take that sentence and say, "Do you know what? We will stop at nothing". We will stop at nothing to help businesses that will struggle; we will stop at nothing to help our food supply that will suffer; we will stop at nothing to help our communities that will suffer. However, we will not do so for partisan reasons, as he claimed. It is simply because we want to protect those businesses; we want to support those food supplies; we want to protect those communities.

He also highlighted the costs of the EU. Yet Northern Ireland is a net beneficiary of EU membership. The people whom we, in this Room, represent get more out of being in the EU than we give in. Yet people say that they want to exit the EU to save money. I am sure that the little Englanders will be delighted by your contribution, but we represent the people of the North.

Martina Anderson said that Brexit is causing a reconsideration of people's views on a united Ireland. That is a point that does, indeed, frighten many of those opposite. If Brexit does lead to a referendum, I wonder how often we will hear then about the democratic will of the people and the mandate offered. Like others, she

highlighted that Wales is calling for an extension, that Scotland is calling for an extension, that Europe is calling for an extension. It would be good to see that the majority of people here will probably call for an extension as well.

Mr Aiken highlighted that many questions about Brexit remain unanswered. With only a few weeks to go, it is one of the strongest arguments that I have heard in favour of asking for an extension. If there is a plethora of unanswered questions, let us take time to get answers to them; let us not go into the unknown.

Mr Blair's contribution focused on the imposition of Brexit on our ability to trade freely and that there is a lack of clarity. He also referred to the fishing communities and the uncertainty that they will face. Being from south Down, I absolutely get the point about our fishing communities.

Mr Frew discussed the process and theory behind Brexit. However, he missed the point: we are not here to rerun the debate about EU membership; we are here to say, "Can we have the extension to allow us to give our businesses and our communities the best opportunity to thrive?". That cannot happen if we are going into the unknown. Businesses need to go into the known.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes, go on ahead.

Mr Nesbitt: Is the Member not rerunning the debate by talking about the fact that we are net beneficiaries of the EU?

Mr McGrath: I am sorry; I did not hear you. Can you go again?

Mr Nesbitt: Och, forget it. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGrath: I am sorry. I could not hear you over here. I apologise. However, I am coming to the contribution that you made. You also detailed how many questions remain unanswered and how officials are contributing to the negotiations and not Ministers, but that it needs to be Ministers. I think that, in order to do that, we need to be able to take an extension to give us the extra time to allow our Ministers to make their contributions.

Mr O'Toole: I thank my colleague for giving way. Does he agree that the Ulster Unionist Party was extremely persuasive in describing how difficult it will be for the Assembly to scrutinise what is happening with the protocol and for us to implement the requirements in the protocol? Does he further agree that talking about the immense difficulties that we face in the coming months and then saying that now is not the time to ask for an extension are incompatible positions?

Mr McGrath: Absolutely. I completely agree. I think that both contributions were eloquent on behalf of the motion that we presented today. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will not give way, because he has seven seconds left.

Mr McGrath: I believe that we must stand with our brothers and sisters in Scotland and Wales — that means all of us, Leavers and Remainers — and counsel a response that maximises the chances of agreement and defends the interests of those whom we represent. We support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am raising this at this stage, because the next subject that we are debating is extremely serious. You exercise enormous power in this Building, so can you explain why, given that this is the highest temperature that has been recorded in June in Northern Ireland for 40 years, the heat is on in this Building at the moment? We are about to enter into a heated debate, and it is going to be a long night. Why, oh why, are the radiators on in this Building on the hottest day of the year?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Strictly speaking, that is a matter for the Commission, although I suspect it may be some Civil Service scheme to grow tomatoes around the place as a renewable food source or something, because it is warm enough for you to grow tomatoes in this Building.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind you that we should continue to uphold social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber. I again remind Members present that, if possible, it would be preferable if we could avoid a Division. Fat chance.

Before the Assembly divides, I want to remind you that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly currently has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. It is important that, during any Division, social distancing in the Chamber continues to be observed. In order to facilitate this, I ask the following. Any Members in the Chamber who are not due to vote in person should consider leaving the Chamber until the Division is concluded. Those Members who wish to vote in the Lobbies on the opposite side of the Chamber to where they are sitting should leave the Chamber by the nearest door and enter the Lobby via the Rotunda. Those remaining Members who are sitting closest to the Lobby doors should enter the Lobbies first. Any Member who has voted may then wish to leave the Chamber until the Division is concluded. However, any Member who needs to vote in both Lobbies should not leave the Chamber. I remind Members of the need to be patient at all times, to follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks and to respect the need for social distancing.

Question, that the amendment be made, put a second time.

The Assembly divided.

Ayes 50; Noes 38.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir,

Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Ms Sugden, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McLaughlin and Mr O'Toole.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken and Mr Buckley.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley [Teller, Noes], Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin [Teller, Ayes], Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole [Teller, Ayes].

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Miss Woods voted for Ms Bailey.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes its unique role as a named party to the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement and the unique impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland; further notes the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and the extreme challenges facing all sections of society and the economy; and calls on the UK Government to request and the European Union to agree an extension of the current Brexit transition period beyond 31 December 2020 in order that Northern Ireland is given adequate time to rebuild and prepare for the implementation of new arrangements.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members should take their ease for a few moments while we change the top Table.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Abortion Legislation: Non-fatal Disabilities

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): This, clearly, is a highly emotive subject area. I ask Members to recognise that and be measured and sensitive in their language.

Ms Bunting: I beg to move:

That this Assembly welcomes the important intervention of disability campaigner Heidi Crowter and rejects the imposition of abortion legislation that extends to all non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Ms Bunting: This is the first debate that we have had in the Assembly since our law on abortion was changed. I am not intending that the debate should be a discussion of how we got here, although, in passing, it must be noted that we have been subjected to constitutional indignities that I could never have imagined a year ago. Neither Wales nor Scotland would ever countenance being subjected to the extraordinary denial of constitutional due process that was meted out to Northern Ireland on this issue.

There are occasions in life — not very often, but sometimes — when we get to meet someone who is truly inspirational, someone whose passion and vision change the way in which we see the world. That is the case when you meet Heidi Crowter, the young woman who is named in the motion. Heidi is 24 and has Down's syndrome. She works in a children's hair salon, and next month, on Independence Day — 4 July — she will marry her fiancé, James Carter, who also has Down's syndrome and whom Heidi describes as gorgeous. This lady is a joy and brings joy.

When you leave a conversation with Heidi, you leave with your heart full. Heidi Crowter is an extraordinary human being; since February she has been in the news, because she is challenging the law in England and Wales that allows abortion up to birth in cases of disability but not in other circumstances. Heidi describes the law in Great Britain as offensive and hurtful.

In 2020, why would we countenance the disability discrimination that the Westminster Parliament was persuaded to vote on thirty years ago, in 1990, before the advent of disability discrimination legislation and before the UK became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD). We cannot and must not separate the regulations from the people to whom they would apply. The reason why the general upper limit for abortion in Great Britain was set at 24 weeks in 1990 is that 24 weeks was then regarded as the point of viability; that is, the point at which a baby could survive outside the womb. Today, things have advanced, and well over 50% of babies born at 24 weeks survive. The figure becomes much higher as gestation progresses. Notwithstanding that fact, regulation 7(1)(b) of the abortion regulations allows abortion up to birth in circumstances where,

"if the child were born, it would suffer from such physical or mental impairment as to be seriously disabled".

We know from statistics in England and Wales that abortions on the grounds of cleft palate, cleft lip and club foot, which are all conditions that can be addressed through surgery, are deemed to meet the threshold of "seriously disabled" and do happen. The problem with that, as Heidi and other disabled people point out, is simple: it means clearly saying that viable human beings with non-fatal disabilities and conditions like Down's syndrome are worthy of less protection under the law than viable human beings who are deemed to be able-bodied. In turn, that clearly says that people with Down's syndrome or other disabilities are of less value than people without disabilities. That is completely unacceptable in 2020. If we do not agree the motion, we signal to every person with a disability that their life is valued differently from that of others. It is wholly wrong for such discriminatory provisions to have been forced on us.

In the last 30 years, since 1990, Northern Ireland, like every jurisdiction in the UK, has introduced legal protections for individuals with disabilities. Those laws seek to illustrate that those with disabilities are equal to everyone else. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) protects the rights of persons with disabilities. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 placed a statutory duty on public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity for persons with a disability. The Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 further amended the DDA and included a requirement that public authorities promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons. In 2009, the UK as a whole ratified the UNCRPD. Those laws are just laws. They reflect the fact that each and every person, regardless of ability or disability, is of value and worth. Do we wish to negate all that progress?

Given the changes in the last 30 years, it is astonishing that the UK Government should give Northern Ireland the 1990 legislation in 2020. There has been no attempt to consider whether the legislation is suitable in a 2020 Northern Ireland context. The only concession to bringing the provision up to date is to change the language from "seriously handicapped" to "seriously disabled". Is "seriously disabled" not quite a high threshold? The threshold of "seriously disabled" in regulation 7 has exactly the same meaning as "seriously handicapped" in the Abortion Act 1967. Ironically, the change from "handicapped" to "disabled" simply reflects the fact that the word "handicapped" is now rightly rejected as pejorative by disabled people. That misses the more basic point that, if one wants to update the law to reflect changing attitudes to disability, the more appropriate way of doing that would be to not allow abortion on that basis at all.

It is extremely disturbing that the Government have chosen to ignore the views of the UNCRPD in its latest report on the UK, which stated:

"The Committee is concerned about perceptions in society that stigmatize persons with disabilities ... and about the termination of pregnancy at any stage on the basis of fetal impairment ... The Committee recommends that the [UK] amend its abortion law accordingly ... without legalizing selective abortion on the ground of fetal deficiency."

Nor has the UK Government acknowledged the views of the Supreme Court, which has considered the issue

of whether, under the European Convention, there is a human right to abortion in cases of non-fatal disability. The court, albeit in a non-binding judgement, found that no such right existed; indeed, Lord Kerr stated:

"UNCRPD is based on the premise that if abortion is permissible, there should be no discrimination on the basis that the foetus, because of a defect, will result in a child being born with a physical or mental disability."

He also said:

"many children born with disabilities, even grave disabilities, lead happy, fulfilled lives. In many instances they enrich and bring joy to their families and those who come into contact with them."

I think that everyone in the Assembly would agree with that assessment.

In truth, the UK Government's explanatory memorandum makes it plain that, rather than being guided by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) report, which actually suggests far more modest changes to Northern Ireland's abortion laws than those in the regulations, their guiding concern is to make sure that any abortion that a woman can have in England can also be had in Northern Ireland. That is why, for all the talk about 12 weeks, the regulations actually allow abortion up to 24 weeks on effectively the same grounds as apply in England and up until birth in cases of disability. Neither of those provisions is required by CEDAW.

Lord Shinkwin, who is seriously disabled, introduced the Abortion (Disability Equality) Bill in the 2016-17 session of the Westminster Parliament. He said:

"I utterly reject this medical mindset that clings to the idea that a disabled baby is a medical failure to be eradicated through abortion. I beg no one for my equality. I know I have as much right as anyone to be alive."

The charity Disability Rights UK, commenting on Lord Shinkwin's Bill, said:

"fundamentally it is about equality. Wherever Parliament sets the number of weeks after which abortion is not permitted, it should be exactly the same whether the pregnancy is likely to result in a disabled or a non-disabled child. All lives are equal."

Let us be crystal clear about what voting for the motion means. You will be voting to say that Northern Ireland rejects abortion law that directly discriminates against a human being purely on the basis of disability. Only that group of viable humans can be aborted up to term. You will be saying that the Assembly does not agree that it is right that unborn children with Down's syndrome or a cleft palate can be aborted just because they have those conditions. You will be voting to reject the imposition of abortion legislation on Northern Ireland. Abortion law is a devolved matter, and we are responsible for reflecting our society's values in this area, not Great Britain. You will be voting for life.

I shall leave you with the words of Heidi Crowter:

"It makes me feel like I shouldn't exist in this world."

Is that the message that the House and we as individuals want to send to our disabled community? Is that who we are? Heidi said:

"My life has as much value as anyone else's. I am asking all MLAs ... to reject Westminster's regulations – please don't vote for more discrimination against people like me ... Please let Northern Ireland continue to be a country where disabled people are valued."

I implore you to support the motion.

Ms Sheerin: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "rejects" and insert

"the specific legislative provision in the abortion legislation that goes beyond fatal foetal abnormalities to include non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Sheerin: The DUP motion today is an attempt to undermine any and all abortion provision in the North. We in Sinn Féin oppose the DUP's attack on women's reproductive rights, and we oppose the DUP's attempt to undermine our right to modern healthcare. The amendment that we have tabled would see a refining of the law to offer abortion services in the North mirrored with the services that we already have in the Twenty-six Counties.

Sinn Féin is not just a parliamentary party; we are a political movement, and we decide policy as a collective with membership having a say on every decision. That is democracy, and it is one of the things that first inspired me when I joined Sinn Féin.

It is the political activism that I have been involved in as a member that I am most proud of. As has been well documented, Sinn Féin activists have been on the ground delivering food parcels to those most in need over the course of the coronavirus pandemic. That was made possible, in most instances, by my comrade Minister Deirdre Hargey, who has been a fantastic advocate for communities since she took on her role in the Executive team just six short months ago. In the midst of this health crisis, we have been involved in our respective communities on local initiatives, from litter picks to sponsored walks, demonstrating leadership and lifting spirits in what has been a tough time for everyone. We continue to drive the little things that make big improvements in the places that we call home. That is what we do; it is activism. When the eighth amendment was repealed in the South just over two years ago, Sinn Féin activists were at the heart of the campaign. The movement that drove for repeal was a broad church. Sinn Féin members took their place and organised just as we would on any other campaign for social justice.

6.00 pm

Abortion is an incredibly sensitive topic that has divided Irish society, and indeed societies across the world, for a long time. Many are uncomfortable with the issue. Only after years of dialogue and a willingness to understand the hurt and pain dealt with by generations of Irish women in crisis situations did we see the conditions whereby over

66% of voters in the Twenty-six Counties chose to repeal the eighth amendment from the Irish Constitution. This tells us that the public understands the need for safe and compassionate abortion services for women. Following on from this, our members in the Oireachtas Committee supported the recommendations of the clinicians and implemented the current abortion legislation in the Twenty-six. Sinn Féin supports abortion in instances of fatal foetal abnormalities, for victims of sexual crime and for anyone whose life or health, including their mental health, is in danger. Our party policy states that any gestational time limit should be set according to the advice of medical practitioners, which is what guided the legislation in the Twenty-six Counties. Sinn Féin's amendment today is merely an expression of that party policy.

In the lead-up to the referendum, I canvassed in Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal and spoke to people on doorsteps about how they would be voting. Indeed, since the change to our party policy at an Ard Fheis preceding the referendum, I have had many conversations with voters, former voters and potential voters about the issue of abortion. As a representative from a political party, I have been lobbied by and engaged with people on all sides of the argument. It is an incredibly sensitive and emotive topic, and none of us knows what any other person has lived through or the experiences that they have had that have shaped the position that they hold. To simply dismiss people who are uncomfortable with the legalisation of termination as backwards or regressive is not helpful. This debate requires sensitivity, empathy and respect. Ultimately, it is about healthcare.

The past is shameful enough and must be left in the past. Generations of pregnant Irish women and girls were treated with disdain for the crime of being pregnant and shunned even in their own homes, villages and towns. Young girls were abandoned by their families and sent away to Magdalene laundries in a whirlwind of secrecy and shame. Mass graves containing the remains of unnamed babies demonstrate the regard in which life was held by some in the Church. Women who could afford it were exploited by illegal abortionists in backstreet rooms masquerading as clinics, and a blind eye was turned to their plight so as not to upset appearances.

There is not a family in Ireland that this has not touched. It is only when a person finds themselves in a position of desperation that they know what they would do. That people in crisis situations here are still not able to receive treatment at home is not good enough. We, in Sinn Féin, would have liked to see abortion services delivered across Ireland by legislators here in Ireland. For us not to have been able to do that is a shame but, when a right is delayed, it is denied. It is for this reason that we supported the regulations that came into force in the North at the end of March. We welcomed the decriminalisation of women. People in already difficult circumstances were being punished, which added untold trauma to the lives of thousands of women who lived in fear of being found out for what they had done.

I wrote to the Minister of Health asking that the regulations as set out by the British Government are implemented and properly funded by the Department of Health locally, so as to see a fully commissioned service across all five healthcare trusts here. The Health Minister has abdicated his responsibilities on this issue, failing to

give clear direction to the health trusts that adheres to the law. That leaves women in limbo. Sinn Féin wants to see an end to that. We want to see a proper, safe, legal service for anyone in crisis, whatever their story. We also acknowledge the work of disability campaigners, such as Heidi Crowter.

Sinn Féin wants to see a fair and just society. We want to see an end to all injustices, both deliberate, state-led, institutionalised discrimination, of the kind which is being talked about at the minute worldwide, and the societal prejudices that are held by people who think that they are doing nothing wrong. It is only when that is called out that the legitimisation of such views is halted, and Sinn Féin will continue to do that.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: I will.

Mr Allister: Before the Member finishes her party political broadcast, and might I remind her that this is not all about Sinn Féin, would she have time to give any thought to the rights of the innocent in the womb, who are denied the most basic right of all, which is the right to live? Does she have any thought for them?

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for his comment. I am a Sinn Féin representative, and, as such, I speak for Sinn Féin.

To serve disabled people properly, we need to build infrastructure that is totally accessible. We need to have inclusivity to properly service section 75 obligations across all public-sector bodies and to raise awareness of the issues that face less-able people in their daily life.

Sinn Féin does not believe that a non-fatal foetal abnormality is an appropriate criterion for an abortion. Our party position, mandated by our party membership, has a modern and compassionate approach to healthcare at its core. That is why we are opposed to the DUP motion. We do not support the DUP's cynical attempt to attack the entire body of human rights-compliant healthcare for women. We are not in favour of blocking the ability of people in crisis to make the decision that they feel is best for them just because other people are uncomfortable with it. The motion would undermine the regulations in totality, by stealth, and Sinn Féin is completely opposed to that. It is 2020, and women here must be afforded modern healthcare in this area, as a right. There can be no further delays. We have waited long enough. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind Members that the Business Committee determined that this is a time-limited debate and set the limit of time for the debate. Clearly, there is considerable interest in this debate, but, clearly, as a result of the guidance that has been given to me, I will not be able to call everyone.

In accordance with Standing Order 17(4), the Business Committee has agreed a format for Members to be called to speak that reflects party balance, but, further to that, Speakers can use some discretion when determining who to call. However, in doing so, we must have due regard not only to the balance of opinion and the number of Members who have indicated a desire to speak but to party strengths.

Members, I ask you all to be realistic about how often you can expect to be called. I cannot call everyone who wishes to be called.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. It provides me and many of my party colleagues, who have a free vote and are not excluded from their party should they differ from the party line, to give voice to and reflect the sincerely held views of the many thousands of constituents who are opposed to abortion and the current legislative proposals by the British Government. I recognise the absolute responsibility on all Members who speak to ensure that their contributions are respectful of the opposing views of others.

This debate is a very emotive one, made more powerful by the intervention of a young lady, Heidi Crowter, who has Down's syndrome. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to speak to her and her mother, Liz, via Zoom, last night. Heidi shared with us her plans for her wedding, which is due to be held next week, but the celebrations for her wedding may have to be postponed due the current COVID-19 restrictions. She has, very sensibly, alternative plans in place. I am sure that you will join me in wishing her and her fiancé, James, a long and happy life together.

This debate provides an opportunity to send a strong message to those in Westminster who seek to put in place regulations in Northern Ireland that offer abortion with no gestational limits for children with disabilities. What does that say about the value that is placed on the life of a person who is born with a disability? It is almost beyond belief that abortion would be allowed up to full term.

The amendment at Westminster that gave rise to this debate was inappropriately attached to a technical Bill that dealt with the postponement of Assembly elections. Many argued that the amendment was clearly outside the scope of the Bill, and all MPs from Northern Ireland who were in attendance voted against it. People here were prevented from having their say on the abortion regulations. Indeed, some, including my good friend and former Member Alban Maginness, have pointed out that that intervention has weakened devolution and the responsibility of the Assembly to address our social and economic problems, no matter how intractable they are. That is one of the reasons why I can't support the Sinn Féin amendment. I fail to understand why a so-called republican party supports a British Government determining on the right to life of unborn Irish children. It is a long way from the proclamation of 1916, which promised to cherish all the children of the nation equally.

My colleague Justin McNulty argues that by removing the words, "rejects the imposition of abortion legislation", from the motion, Sinn Féin's amendment gives cover to an overreaching British Government that chose to override the democratic wishes of people in this part of Ireland. I cannot support the amendment for that and other reasons.

I am very conscious of the public interest in this debate and the arguments from both sides, but especially from people with disabilities who live within our families and communities. Very many people with a disability live independently and have rich and fulfilling lives, but that is not the reality for all. Therefore, as a society, it is not enough for us to pay lip service to families and carers who struggle to cope with their caring responsibilities. We must invest in support and respite services to enable individuals

to live as fulfilling a life as possible. Diversity and inclusion should be celebrated.

I support the motion and conclude by referring to Heidi, who tells us that we are “amazing just the way we are”.

Mrs Barton: I take part in this debate with a sense of bewilderment and irony. Over the past three months, the country has listened to accounts of individuals who have been striving to live, and our medical profession has been doing all in its power to save lives in the face of COVID. Yet, we are here to reject discriminatory abortion legislation that extends to all non-fatal disabilities.

As a result of both Houses of Parliament supporting a change in the law on abortion in Northern Ireland and ignoring the rights of the unborn child, one finds oneself having to defend those rights; the rights of the baby in the womb. We are debating the imposition of abortion legislation that treats children in the womb with non-fatal disabilities differently from those who do not have a disability. Is that not discrimination? Everyone has a right to life; those who are disabled and those who are not must be treated and valued equally. All life is sacred.

Not one of us in this Chamber is perfect: we are either too tall or too short, too small or too large. The list is endless, yet, because of this new legislation, the helpless in the womb, because of their imperfections, such as a cleft palate, a club foot or Down's syndrome, may have their lives terminated on the basis of their non-fatal impairment. How diabolical.

6.15 pm

Last year, I had the pleasure of being invited by a young man with Down's syndrome to watch him participate in the qualifying rounds for the Special Olympics football team. What a joy it was for his parents and me. How wonderful it was to see him taking part in a team sport, passing the ball, listening to the pep talk at half-time and going on to score the winning goal. How proud were his parents, like the other parents who had come to stand on the sidelines to encourage and cheer on their sons? That same young man had been away from his parents for a week, training for his matches, leading a life in many ways similar to those of our household names who represent their country at sporting events. When not playing sport, he was helping out on the family farm. Who can say that that young man was not leading a fulfilling, independent life? How could that young person be denied his opportunity? A young lady whom I know who also has Down's syndrome leads a full and busy life helping in the kitchen of her local school, preparing and serving lunches, the very school where she was once a pupil.

Both of those young people are evidence of how important their individual roles in society are, no matter how minor or major their limitations. Think of how much they have enriched the lives of their parents, siblings and wider family and how much society has learned and gained from them. Yes, having a disabled baby may be a challenge, but who has not been challenged by a baby, be it restlessness at night due to colic or just not wanting to sleep? How many of us are not challenged by our children's behaviour, whether they are able-bodied or not?

Before I conclude, it is important to make the point that we have to remember the health workers who work with these people. They may have an issue of conscience

with the law. Finally, it is important to remember that one cannot tolerate and promote disabled babies having less protection in law than babies who are not disabled. All humans should be valued and protected equally. Therefore, I welcome the intervention of disability campaigner Heidi Crowter and support the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: I will speak in a personal capacity, as abortion is a matter of conscience for members of the Alliance Party. I will not support the motion or the amendment.

On Thursday evenings, we all go out at 8:00 pm to clap for our medical workforce, as we value their clinical credentials, their professional judgement and the care and compassion that they show to COVID-19 patients. Yet, what the motion and the amendment suggest is that we are not to value their clinical credentials, their professional judgement and the care and compassion that they show to pregnant women on a Friday morning. I trust our registered medical professionals, and I trust women.

By week 20, when we get the big scan and women have thought of names and chosen prams etc, receiving important news about complexities with your pregnancy would floor any one of us. If any MLA thinks that a woman would make a choice to terminate a late pregnancy without days of completely fretting and agonising through every aspect of the rest of the pregnancy and beyond, they, in my opinion, are viewing those women with disrespect and a lack of empathy. The DUP, in bringing this non-binding motion, and Sinn Féin, in proposing the amendment, are playing politics by trying to imply that any MLA who does not support them does not care about children born with a disability. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The motion refers to those who live with Down's syndrome. My aunt Margaret, who is now, sadly, passed, lived with Down's syndrome. She passed away in her 50s and was a very much-loved and central member of my mother's family circle. So, if my daughter, for example, came to me with such a diagnosis during a pregnancy, of course I would support her. However, the regulations are not about me and my family; they are about the unknown women whose personal circumstances I know nothing about. The regulations are not about compelling a woman to terminate a pregnancy; they are about providing that healthcare option in our country.

Last year, when the Northern Ireland Office engaged with political parties and other stakeholders, they made it clear that they were looking at abortion laws and regulations across the UK, Ireland and western Europe in order to learn from their experiences. I have no doubt, therefore, that the NIO officials considered the Health Act 2018 in the Republic of Ireland, which restricts foetal anomaly-related abortions to those deemed fatal. That means that medical professionals do not feel comfortable with such ambiguous terminology in the regulations, so women from the South have had to continue to travel to England to access their healthcare. That Act is not preventing abortion; they just continue to export the problem. As a legislator in the Assembly, I would hate to see any woman forced to make such a lonely and heartbreaking journey.

Parts 3 to 7 of the regulations spell out clearly the grounds for abortion, with particular reference to the role of the two registered medical professionals. When the Health Minister has been asked about how that works in practice

through Assembly questions for written answer, he has replied:

“My Department has made it clear to medical professionals that abortion is now legal and they should assess on a case by case basis whether a woman’s individual circumstances meet the grounds for a termination of pregnancy. This would include surgical abortion where this is clinically necessary.”

He did not use the words “desirable” or “capricious”: he used “clinically necessary”.

Professional accountability mechanisms are built into the regulations. They give the General Medical Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Council powers to investigate whether the fitness to practise of a registered medical professional is impaired, and the governance and transparency mechanisms are built in, with a requirement on the registered medical professionals to report every termination to the Chief Medical Officer.

The truth is that procuring an abortion is never an easy decision for a woman, whether it is a crisis pregnancy for which she seeks an early medical abortion or when she receives news of a severe foetal impairment or a fatal foetal abnormality. As a compassionate society, we must do all that we can to support her, not judge or vilify her.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage Members to be concise in their contributions. They do not have to take their full five minutes. It may assist me to get another Member in if they do not.

Mr Buckley: I speak on an issue that is one of the most crucial of our lifetime: the sanctity of life. It is an issue that transcends traditional political and community lines and one that was cruelly taken from us and exploited by English MPs at a time of Westminster political chaos. Since I took my place in the House, I have sought to fight for the defenceless, the weak and the innocent. Surely, others in the House have been moved by the incredible crusade of Heidi Crowter, a young lady with Down’s syndrome who is determined to fight for justice and equality. Moving as Heidi’s story is, it does not stand in isolation. Many homes in Northern Ireland are filled with laughter, joy and happiness by those born with disabilities. Who are those disabled people? They are brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles, nieces and nephews, children and grandchildren. They are real people. Who are we to say that their life is worth less?

I stand saddened and bewildered that, at a time when communities, Governments and the field of medicine around the world have been mobilised to save the lives of the most vulnerable, we are debating an issue that, if left unopposed, would strip those innocent, preborn babies of the most basic right of all: the right to life. Regulation 7 is a transparent expression of discrimination. It means giving non-disabled viable babies in the womb greater legal protection than disabled viable babies in the womb. That would, of course, be discriminatory. The legal difference of treatment that we are talking about here is immense, meaning that, on the one hand, the life is protected, while, on the other, far from offering protection, the state will happily acquiesce in the termination of viable disabled human beings. That is no ordinary discrimination: that is fatal discrimination.

Is it any wonder that Heidi Crowter has said, as a lady with Down’s Syndrome, that the law makes her sad and cry? It would make me sad and cry if I had Down’s Syndrome. To be honest with you, it makes me sad and cry even though I do not. I salute Heidi and her boldness in going to the courts to try to get this discriminatory law struck down. I want the Assembly to compassionately respond and say, “Not in our name”.

I do not believe that any part of the United Kingdom has been subject to worse constitutional abuses in modern times than Northern Ireland has in the development of the abortion regulations. Regardless of what we may or may not think of their content, no self-respecting Member of the House should accept them because of the way in which they have been developed. Abortion is a devolved matter. The amendment that sought to change Northern Ireland’s abortion laws in spite of this was, according to the Commons Clerk, out of scope and got through only because of the pressure of a large number of signatures by MPs from outside Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Absolutely, yes.

Mr Givan: Will the Member agree with me that that was an abuse of parliamentary and, indeed, constitutional norms?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Buckley: Absolutely, and it is for those very reasons that the regulations cannot be cherry-picked. That is why we cannot support the Sinn Féin amendment. They rise together or fall together.

Let us look at what happened. Northern Ireland MPs were ignored on what was a Northern Ireland-only issue. There was a 17-minute debate on a matter of life and death and an NIO consultation where the proposals were overwhelmingly opposed by 79% of submissions. The essence of constitutional democracy is not simply majoritarianism; it is majoritarianism subject to rules. As long as the abortion regulations exist, they openly mock the people of Northern Ireland and their right to the dignity of constitutional due process. The litany of constitutional offences that has informed the way that Westminster and Whitehall have handled the issue since last July is now massively compounded by the fact that, despite the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Her Majesty’s Government instead propose to ask Westminster to vote to pass legislation on a devolved matter. We must call on the Government to respect devolution, to abandon the regulations and to repeal section 9. Quite simply, the lives of our unborn depend on it.

Dr Archibald: The motion tabled by the DUP is a transparent attempt to undermine the progress made to date and deny women reproductive rights. The legislative framework on abortion in the North prior to last October failed women. Based on archaic legislation from 1861, it criminalised those accessing abortion and forced people to travel for healthcare or access medication online with the fear of prosecution if anything went wrong. It disproportionately impacted on those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and caused additional stress and trauma to so many people.

Like many others, I campaigned for the repeal of the eighth amendment and for the long overdue change in

the law in the North. The fact that Westminster had to legislate is regrettable, but it was necessary because of the failure of the DUP and others to uphold human rights obligations. My preference and that of my party would have been for the Assembly to legislate for those who we represent. However, we now have the legislative framework that entitles women to access abortion services, and the Health Minister should implement the regulations and commission the services as a matter of urgency. I commend all of those who campaigned for many years to bring about the change and those who continue to campaign for the right of women to access modern and compassionate healthcare.

We should not conflate issues in what is already an emotive debate for many people. I doubt that anyone here does not agree that we must support and campaign for the rights of persons with disabilities and for proper access to support and services for all those with additional needs.

6.30 pm

We must support those who choose to continue with a pregnancy with a diagnosis of foetal abnormality and put in place adequate perinatal healthcare services. We must not, however, stigmatise any individual who makes the difficult decision to terminate a pregnancy. Whatever one's personal view on the issue, we, as legislators, have a duty to ensure that there is provision of modern healthcare for all citizens, including local access to abortion services.

Mrs Cameron: What kind of society do we want to live in? That is the fundamental question. My view is that how we treat those with disabilities and how we shape society for them goes a long way to determining the answer. At the heart of the matter before us today is this question: are those with a disability equal citizens? Is the remarkable and inspiring Heidi Crowter an equal citizen to every MLA in the House?

The stance that the House takes on regulation 7(1) (b) and regulation 13 in the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 is a test for all of us who believe in equality. In a genuinely humane society, it would be entirely wrong to allow the termination of any viable human being, whether they have a disability or not. What is particularly appalling about this legislation from a disability perspective is that it compounds the offence by stating that it would be wrong to terminate another viable human being of exactly the same age because they do not have Down's syndrome or another non-fatal disability. That sends out a message, loud and clear, that human beings with Down's syndrome or other non-fatal disabilities are worthy of less protection in law because they are less worthwhile and less valuable.

That is the ethic of a eugenic society that I, for one, have no desire to be a part of. In England and Wales, in cases in which women received a diagnosis before birth that their child had Down's syndrome, the abortion rate between 2015 and 2017 was a staggering 85.1%. I have been disturbed by some of the arguments that have been advanced in favour of allowing abortion upon the diagnosis of Down's syndrome from the point of viability until birth. Those arguing refuse to engage with the fact that we are talking about a viable human being and focus just on what, they say, is the right of the woman to abort in those circumstances.

There is sometimes an attempt to give legitimacy to the notion that we should sanction disability discrimination in abortion legislation because of the health of the mother. That simply will not do. If one prohibits discriminatory abortion for disability, it does not change the fact that it is still legal to abort up until birth if the life of the mother is in danger. That has always been legal in Northern Ireland, although if it is possible to save the mother's life by removing the child in a way that keeps the child alive as well, that clearly must be striven for. Others have simply tried to change the subject by saying, "Why don't they focus more on providing support for our mothers and children with non-fatal disabilities?"

I will address the amendment standing in the name of Sinn Féin MLAs. First, I am pleased that Sinn Féin is clear that it cannot support abortion on the basis of non-fatal disability up until birth, but its amendment falls short, as it fails to acknowledge the concerns over other aspects of the regulations and the constitutional violation against the devolved settlement by imposing Westminster rule on the people of Northern Ireland in this area. I do not believe, because of the extraordinary manner in which they have been developed, that any self-respecting person in Northern Ireland should accept the regulations.

Moreover, devolution has now been restored. We are quite capable of developing our own legislation. Rather than ask the Westminster Parliament to vote for regulations, the next step that the UK Government should take is to ask Westminster to recognise that devolution has now been restored for nearly five months and that it is time for it to repeal section 9, which has now been overtaken by events.

As the mover of the amendment that became section 9 said at the time:

"if it was not for the fact that we do not have an Assembly, this would absolutely not be the right way forward, but we do not have an Assembly and we will not have one any time soon."

That statement was made on 9 July 2019. We now have an Assembly, and Westminster has still not voted on a new abortion law for Northern Ireland, so now is absolutely not the right time for such a vote. Instead, the Government should ask Parliament to recognise the restoration of the Assembly by repealing section 9, and let the business of defining our own abortion law take place. Thank you.

Mr Gildernew: Let me start by stating that I am opposed to this motion. It clearly aims to rollback elements of the progress on rights and access to appropriate medical care for women in our society, who should be treated with respect and compassion. I wish to speak in support of the amendment.

Abortion is a sensitive and emotive issue for many people, but change is clearly needed. Before being repealed on 22 October, women who found themselves in the difficult position of seeking an abortion were criminalised under section 58 and 59 of Westminster's Offences Against the Person Act. In order to access abortion services, women had to either travel overseas, which delayed the termination and added expense and stress, or purchase abortion pills without proper medical advice and supervision. We cannot leave women to deal with these situations without support and appropriate healthcare; nor can we continue to turn a blind eye to the plight of those

who are struggling with issues arising from rape and fatal foetal abnormality.

There are no perfect or easy solutions here. However, as legislators, we must do our utmost to address these issues as best we can. The Health Committee has written to the Minister of Health to urge him to provide appropriate abortion services for women, particularly in the light of the additional complications that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time, he has a duty to ensure that services are provided in a safe and accessible way.

Sinn Féin's preference was for the Assembly to introduce legislation on safe and compassionate abortion services for the North of Ireland, so that women on the entire island will have the services that they deserve. In the South, legislation was developed following detailed consideration and discussion via a citizens assembly, and was strongly ratified by those living in the 26 counties via a referendum.

Sinn Féin believes that abortion should be available where a woman's life, health or mental health is at risk, in cases of fatal foetal abnormality and in cases of rape or sexual abuse. Sinn Féin believes that abortion without specific indication should be available through a GP-led service in a clinical context as determined by law and licensing practice for a limited gestational period. We support the joint Oireachtas Committee finding that it is not possible to legislate for abortion in the case of rape in a compassionate way. That is reflected in 'A new legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland', which says:

"that this provision is proportionate and appropriate in order to avoid building a system that could lead to further trauma for victims of rape or incest or act as a barrier to access for victims of sexual crime."

However, Sinn Féin does not support CEDAW's recommendations to provide abortion in the case of severe foetal impairment such as Down's syndrome. Our amendment welcomes the important intervention by disability campaigner Heidi Crowter, who has been referred to today, and rejects the specific legislative provision in the abortion legislation that goes beyond fatal foetal abnormalities to include non-fatal disabilities such as Down's syndrome. I support the amendment.

Mr O'Toole: I will speak, extremely briefly, on the motion and the amendment. First, this is an extraordinarily difficult and complicated subject. It is easy to portray this as a completely black and white question, but it is not. As multiple Members have mentioned, abortion is an extraordinarily sensitive subject. It divides people and families. It can divide good-willed people who are in an honest and ethical disagreement about these very profound issues.

As my colleague Dolores Kelly outlined, my party enables a conscience vote on this issue, which recognises that it is extraordinarily sensitive. Before I move to the substance of the motion and the amendment, I want to say very clearly that I believe that it is possible for good-willed, moral and ethical people to take different views on this subject.

Moving on to the substance of the motion, I will not support the DUP motion this evening. A few weeks ago, I said in the Chamber that I believed that it was a positive step forward in healthcare for woman in Northern Ireland that provision had been made to, in a sense, bring us closer to provision in the rest of the UK and, indeed, the rest

of Ireland. As a legislator, which I now am, key for me in coming to this practical decision, while thinking through all the moral and ethical implications, was not to try to come to a catch-all position for everyone. As a legislator, is it my job to limit the options that are available to women who are in extraordinary distress? Although I may have reservations about specific instances and specific issues, it really is not for me, in every circumstance, to say to women in extreme distress that they cannot access healthcare.

I found it difficult to hear testimony from people with disabilities who expressed views on this. None of us can pretend that this stuff is easy. There is a range of views in the disabled community. It is also true that there is a range of other ways in which we as a society and as a state can do better by disabled people. I want to say, as others said, that in no way are my views on abortion care a reflection of my views on the value of disabled people. I will not support the motion, which, I believe, would start to take us back in terms of abortion care in Northern Ireland.

I think that it is legitimate for the motion to be debated. I do not think that the Northern Ireland Assembly should not be able to have this debate. In the debate on the previous item of business, I talked about the importance of the Assembly having its voice heard, and I completely accept that. Many in the Chamber, including some from my party, will take a different view from me. We are here now, and I respect your right to make your voice heard on this.

I will not support the DUP motion. I will not support the Sinn Féin amendment, in part because I am not entirely clear on what it is intended to do. I also think that it would contribute to a whittling away of rights. That said, it is important that people are able to debate these issues, and I respect the fact that we are able to debate them tonight in the Assembly. I hope that we can proceed with the debate in as respectful a way as possible.

Mr Butler: As a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, this is for me, a matter of conscience, and I will speak personally.

For me, today's motion is not about the rights and wrongs of abortion. If it were, I fear that we would simply be rehearsing the very old and long-held positions that, in many ways, paved the way for the Westminster Government and the NIO to dream up such extreme and discriminatory measures, disregarding the vast majority of responses to the consultation on the proposed legislation and regulations.

In my mind, the motion and amendment are about our attitudes to equality and disability. I will go much further: almost all of us in the Chamber are engaged in politics because we are fuelled by the desire for justice, equality and humanity. Sometimes, depending on the setting of the story, that narrative becomes blurred, but not in this case. When elected to the Assembly in 2016, I established two new passions. One, as everyone in the House will know, is mental health. The other, born of my active membership of the relevant all-party groups (APGs), is learning disability and disability. I have learnt many things from participating in these forums. Perhaps the overriding theme common to these APGs is that of stigmatisation, discrimination and the ongoing battle for equality. I cannot overstate the conversations in which I have been involved with stakeholders of these groups. Those conversations

demonstrated the real difficulties and barriers that people with a disability or learning disability still face here in Northern Ireland in 2020.

I have enjoyed every moment of learning more about disability and learning disability, having to challenge my perceptions and the myths about what a normal life is, what a life of fulfilment is and what really matters.

A number of years ago, at an event with Mencap in the Long Gallery, I had the absolute privilege of holding and nursing a two-year-old boy. His mum handed him to me, and I do not exaggerate when I say that, as he smiled into my face, I absolutely fell in love with him. I will not use his name, because I do not have the permission from his mum, but I can tell you, that young man, who has Down's syndrome, left an indelible mark on my heart.

6.45 pm

In Lisburn, we are very proud of the work done by Stepping Stones. Since 1996, the team have striven with great passion and determination to offer support and value to people with learning difficulties and disabilities. All the trainees have a learning difficulty, many of them men and women with Down's syndrome. Recently, I called with their CEO at their new premises — Avenue 1 — for coffee and a snack. What struck me was the reception I got from the front-of-house waiter. I was shown to my seat, order taken and advice given on what was evidently a menu that he had contributed to. That young man with Down's syndrome showed me an attitude of hospitality and customer service sometimes missing in other settings.

At Christmas time, I look forward to getting an invitation. We all do. We love to get those invitations to carol and nativity services. In addition, the ones I look forward to most are the invites from Mencap and from Parkview Special School in Lisburn. To my great delight, two years ago, I got an invitation to the Glenveagh Special School nativity play. Even if you do not like Christmas, I suggest you seek out an opportunity to go to one of those nativity scenes.

There can be no suggestion but that, for many of these individuals and very special children, life can be a challenge and, for some, quite difficult.

However, to see the joy, concentration and effort, the professionalism —

and often the mischievousness on their faces and of their actions — only reaffirms, if required, that every life is precious and that we must do all we can to empower, support and demonstrate to those children and pupils, that they are valued every bit as much as we value ourselves.

A number of disability champions are worthy of mention. However, for the purpose of this debate, there is only one that I will name, as many of you have done so far, and that is Heidi Crowter. I spent 40 minutes on a Zoom call on Saturday morning with Heidi, Paul, Joanne and myself, I can safely say that, if I needed any validation to support the motion, I got it in spades.

The sad reality remains that Heidi has to speak on an issue of legislation and regulation which seeks to devalue the person she is.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Yes, indeed.

Mr Givan: In that call, which I was able to share with Robbie, you will agree that she really spoke to the heart, and is a powerful advocate on this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute. I ask Members to speak towards the Chair, to ensure that the microphone picks up what they say.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and thank you for the intervention. Indeed, as has been pointed out by Dolores Kelly, a moment spent talking to Heidi reaffirms the heart that there is. There are champions out there, working in really challenging circumstances.

As I said, Heidi has Down's syndrome, and she is talking about a regulation that speaks about her. Put simply, regulation 7(1)(b) allows abortion for serious foetal "impairment":

"Where there is a substantial risk that if born the child"

— that is the word used in the regulation —

"would suffer from such physical or mental impairment as to be seriously disabled."

Imagine having to have a face-to-face discussion with someone who was born with what, in England and Wales, is, for the purpose of abortion legislation, deemed, "a serious foetal impairment."

That same person, Heidi, will soon be 24, and, as we have heard, she is going to be married. She is a disability champion. She will soon marry her fiancé. Could any of you seriously sit face-to-face with Heidi and say, "You are not equal"?

Today, we have an opportunity to set aside —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Butler: — the wider abortion debate, and insist that this legislation is challenged and changed. I say to Heidi, and others who have Down's syndrome and other non-fatal disabilities that, even as an unborn baby, you are equal, you are valued and you are seen.

Mr Lyttle: Alliance Party policy on abortion is a matter of individual conscience, therefore, I speak in a personal capacity. I also say, at the outset, that it would enrich the debate — I say this sincerely — if the DUP were able to speak to the work of the Education Minister to help pupils with disabilities at this time.

I have spoken on this serious matter of abortion in the Assembly on a number of occasions. I have done my best to engage with health professionals and families affected by it and with widely different views on it. In February 2016, over four years ago, in part because of that engagement, I voted in favour of legislative reform, proposed by our colleagues Trevor Lunn MLA and Stewart Dickson MLA, for abortion on the grounds of fatal foetal abnormality, legislative provision that the courts have since required of this jurisdiction.

I acknowledge that there are, however, many people who support the inclusion of severe foetal abnormality as grounds for abortion in legislation due to concern that its omission could limit access to termination in cases of fatal

foetal abnormality, and I will do my best to engage with those concerns in my role.

There are, however, many people in the Assembly and in Northern Ireland who cannot support legislative provision for abortion on the grounds of serious disability. Indeed, the DUP and Sinn Féin appear to agree on that matter, but somehow have conspired to disagree in the debate today, which appears to be a real missed opportunity. As far as I can see, the text of the DUP motion rejects abortion legislation that extends to all non-fatal disabilities, and the same provision is contained in the amendment. It is a real shame and a disappointment that some degree of agreement was not reached in that regard.

I am not able to support legislative provision for abortion on what I believe are ill-defined grounds of severe foetal abnormality, particularly if it provides for abortion on the grounds of serious physical or mental disability. My assessment of the amendment and the motion is that someone who is unable to support abortion on the grounds of non-fatal disabilities ought to vote in favour of the amendment and the motion. As far as I can see, they oppose abortion on the grounds of non-fatal disability, and I will, therefore, vote for the amendment and the motion on those grounds on this occasion.

It must be acknowledged, however, that neither the amendment nor the motion do anything to change what is a legal duty on the UK Government to implement CEDAW recommendations on abortion, which include the grounds of severe foetal abnormality. I had hoped that the UK legislation would have accepted fatal foetal abnormality to satisfy the CEDAW requirement, but that does not appear to be the case at this stage. It is also an inescapable fact that the UK abortion legislation exists because the Northern Ireland Executive did not. I do not know if Northern Ireland legislation can amend primary UK legislation, but, if people are serious about delivering fit-for-purpose abortion legislation in Northern Ireland, a three-year Executive hiatus and private Member's motions will not achieve that.

I will continue to do my best to engage respectfully, openly and inclusively on the serious matter of abortion legislation with anyone who gives me the opportunity to do so.

Ms Bailey: I am one of very many who are very thankful to the Westminster MPs, and to Stella Creasy in particular, for changing our laws. Instead of debating why Northern Ireland is still without regulations, we are debating laws that we cannot change.

Reducing an abnormality clause to permit only fatal abnormalities can, as shown by the example in the Republic of Ireland, actually limit fatal diagnoses due to the unattainable certainty required. The motion and the amendment would compel medics to make impossible distinctions between fatal and non-fatal abnormalities, limiting access to abortion healthcare. If the motion and amendment were enforced, it would mean that women and girls would be forced to continue to travel to England and beyond, just as they were before the legislation changed. A similar clause in the Irish Republic has resulted in women and girls whose pregnancies are diagnosed with severe and life-threatening abnormalities continuing to travel overseas to access abortion, just as if the law had never changed.

I am stunned at the Sinn Féin amendment. I am stunned at the forked-tongue language. The amendment would force women to continue to rely on healthcare in England, and that was not Sinn Féin's election message, which was about equality for all and compassionate healthcare. This is what a clawback of women's rights looks like, this is what political opportunism looks like and this is what populism looks like.

It is ironic for the DUP to claim that it is morally unjustifiable to use a foetus as a political bargaining chip when the same DUP Members write to their constituents and request a letter-writing campaign to promote a change in legislation. But at least the DUP is consistent in its disdain for women, their bodies and their choices. The motion and amendment are not compliant with CEDAW, and our law states that we need to be.

The CEDAW report recommends that:

"abortion on the ground of severe foetal impairment be available to facilitate reproductive choice and autonomy, States parties are obligated to ensure that women's decisions to terminate pregnancies on this ground do not perpetuate stereotypes towards persons with disabilities. Such measures should include the provision of appropriate social and financial support for women who choose to carry such pregnancies to term."

We should be discussing significant increases in funding to enable disabled people, rather than trying to broadly restrict rights for women in Northern Ireland. The Green Party will not support the start of a clawback.

Disabled Women Ireland has stated:

"social and financial support to disabled people and their parents is the strongest way to deal with concerns for disability rights. Recognising the full extent of disabled people's rights from infancy to old age – to education, to early childhood support, to personal assistance – will make meaningful changes to the quality of disabled people's everyday lives. Restrictions on abortion will only place further restrictions on the reproductive rights and freedoms of people with disabilities."

The motion and the amendment would disproportionately harm disabled women whose pregnancies are diagnosed with a foetal anomaly and contravene the state's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Mr Gildernew has already spoken in the debate. I will quote something that he said recently:

"women in the north must be able to access modern and compassionate healthcare services that have been legislated for... Sinn Féin welcomes the decriminalisation of women and the legalisation of modern health care services for women in the north. This means that women in crisis will now have the benefit of local medical services, advice and support."

However, the amendment will mean that women from Northern Ireland will still have to travel to access abortion healthcare. That is not my understanding of "local". Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill has stated:

"Sinn Fein is opposed to the extension of Britain's 1967 Act to the north but British legislation which

criminalises women who have an abortion should be repealed immediately."

Well, that has been done. What the motion and the amendment mean is that, although Sinn Féin might not want British legislation, it is happy to continue to export Irish and Northern Irish women to Britain for healthcare. That is simple hypocrisy in my book. What happened to the platitudes about trusting women —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Bailey: — to make decisions about their bodies, lives and pregnancies? What happened to the slogan, "The North is next"?

The Green Party will vote against the motion and the amendment. I urge other Members — Sinn Féin included — to do the same.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Ms Sugden: First, I would like to say a few words about Heidi Crowter. Heidi really is a remarkable young woman. I get goosebumps when I see her and other young women like her speaking up for what they believe in. I have not met Heidi — I would really like to — but, from what I see and hear, I know that her challenges have not limited her; rather, she takes value from those challenges to enable and strengthen her. We could learn so much from that spirit. Heidi's intervention is important because she represents an informed and experienced voice that is affected by the debate. Like other MLAs, I have received significant correspondence from constituents and others expressing their view on the issue. I appreciate the time that they have taken to contact me not just in the past week but in the time since the legislation was passed at Westminster.

I rise not to support the motion or the amendment for a number of reasons that, I hope, I have time to outline. I appreciate the opportunity that the proponents of the motion have given the House to discuss the issue. We are a devolved region of the United Kingdom with statutory responsibility for health and justice issues, and it should have been for Members of this House to progress the legislation and subsequent regulations. I sought to do that when I was Minister of Justice in a previous mandate, alongside the then Health Minister, in respect of fatal foetal abnormalities. I genuinely believe that that would have happened had the Executive not collapsed. At the time, I was criticised for sitting on a report. I did not; I was giving my Executive colleagues time to consider it. If they had no intention of supporting any change, they would have rejected it from the outset. They did not.

7.00 pm

I have no doubt that the intention behind the motion is to give its proponents an opportunity to express and put on record their partisan position on abortion generally, subsequent to legislation that was passed in Westminster last year. I have no difficulty with that. I reiterate my earlier point: the issue should have been debated and progressed in this House. But it was not. It happened at Westminster, where the party that has moved the motion today had, at that time, the power there to stop it happening. If I overstate that power — I do not believe that I do — I would really welcome an intervention from the DUP to explain why they did not try to stop it at that point, especially

considering the action that they have taken today and took in October. Yes, you voted against it, but you had the ear of Downing Street and could have done much more. I do not think that you did.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. Let me assure the Member that, at every opportunity, the DUP, at its highest levels, engaged with the Prime Minister about not pursuing this course of action. The Member will know that this matter is a free vote, as it has for other parties, and there was an inability to whip Conservative MPs on it, so the vote was overwhelmingly passed in Parliament. Our MPs, as the Member indicated, voted against it, and we continued to seek to stop what has been happening. This motion is part of that ongoing campaign. I ask the Member to reflect on that, and I will make more comments and hope that she can come to a different position to what she has outlined.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Sugden: Thank you. I appreciate that, but I still feel that you had power to do something more than vote against it and pay, I suppose, lip service to the fact that you did not support that motion.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes, of course.

Mrs Foster: The Member needs to understand that it was a free vote in the House of Commons and that the majority of Conservative MPs did not vote in favour of what went through the House. She will recall that, at that stage, there were a considerable number of others in the House. It was not like today, when they have a majority. Therefore, the House voted in a particular way. It did not really matter what the Prime Minister had to say about the matter; the matter went through the House on an amendment, as she will remember, tabled by the Labour Party. It is unfair of the Member to characterise it as this party not doing enough to stop the matter. Unlike other parties in the House, we have been consistently in favour of pro-life positions. It is very wrong of the Member to do that.

Ms Sugden: I thank the leader of the DUP for giving me that side of it. I disagree, but that is obviously something that we will have to agree to disagree on.

That said, I fully respect the varied opinion on the issue, and I genuinely welcome the discussion. I just do not like the choreography, which also extends to the amendment tabled by those on the other side of the House. It is easy to agree with decisions when you have relinquished responsibility to someone else, but, when you are called on it, please be honest.

Nonetheless, there are many opinions, and I have taken time to listen to all of them. It is clear to me that this is not a simple binary choice of pro-life versus pro-choice. It is not black and white; it is the greyest of greys. I remain deeply conflicted about abortion, and I am not even sure I entirely agree with the position that I am taking. It is a highly emotive issue, and my guide tends to be compassion for everyone involved. Our previous law and our leadership vacuum could not facilitate compassion for women, their partners, their families and the babies they carried, so the law needed to change.

When I initially read the motion, I was inclined to support it, because I have difficulty with the regulations, namely part 3, which enables termination up to birth in certain circumstances. I thought that the motion was referring to that. I reread the motion and found that it rejects all imposition of abortion legislation, including not only Down's syndrome but everything else —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Sugden: — including FFA and other issues. The wording is ambiguous, and, knowing the proponents' policy position on the matter, I do not think that I can support the motion.

Lastly, I will make a point about why people do not feel supported.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

I call Gerry Carroll. I advise you that there are only two minutes remaining in the debate, should you choose to take them.

Mr Carroll: It is important that I get a chance to speak, but it is a shame that I do not get the same time as others.

Today's debate about abortion has created confusion and outrage, and it is not difficult to see why. On the one hand, the Supreme Court declared that the restrictions on abortion at the heart of the DUP motion and the Sinn Féin amendment are a breach of human rights. The UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights deemed such restrictions as "gender-based violence" and "unconscionable" and said:

"It's inhuman, it's cruel and it's tantamount to torture in certain conditions."

When Westminster intervened to decriminalise abortion, the majority of people here welcomed it.

On the other hand, the two largest parties have now banded together to send out a clear message that abortion should be heavily restricted, despite the brutal experiences that that creates for women and pregnant people. There is confusion, too, around the basis for Sinn Féin's amendment, which seems to totally ignore its own policy on women's health and abortion and is wholly out of step with the pro-choice rhetoric that it used during the repeal referendum. Forcing women to travel for abortion is not pro-choice, nor is it humane.

Finally, there is confusion as to why this agenda is being pushed when the evidence shows that around the world, where abortion restrictions are lifted and it is treated as healthcare rather than a legal issue, the rates of later-term abortions actually fall. In Canada, there are no restrictions and no time limits, and the rate of abortions after 20 weeks is just 0.6%, three times less than the rate in Britain. Medical professionals, royal colleges, the UN, Amnesty and other rights-based organisations overwhelmingly endorse the removal of barriers to accessing abortion as best medical practice.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Carroll: For all those reasons, I oppose this shameful attempt by Sinn Féin and the DUP to restrict reproductive rights, and I will vote against the amendment and the

motion. It is important that we trust women to make the decisions that they know are best for them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Pat Sheehan to wind up on the amendment. He will have five minutes.

Mr Sheehan: From the outset, I want to say that Sinn Féin will oppose the DUP motion, which is aimed at denying women access to their reproductive rights. I stand here as a member of the Health Committee to talk about an issue that relates to women's health, and I appreciate that we are discussing a very emotive and contentious issue, with very strongly held views on all sides of the debate. It is important that respect is shown to all views in this debate.

Sinn Féin has a very clear view on the issue of abortion, and I want to set out our position so that there is no ambiguity or misunderstanding about where we stand. Sinn Féin is an entirely democratic political party, and our policies on all issues are decided at our ard-fheiseanna on an annual basis by our party membership. Our party members clearly expressed a view at our ard-fheis in 2018 that previous legislation on abortion, North and South, was failing women on this island, and also that it was incompatible with human rights law.

Clearly, there is a mood out in society that is demanding changes to abortion law, and that same mood exists within Sinn Féin. That is not to say that we support the introduction of the British Abortion Act 1967 here in the North; we do not. Our position is clear and consistent. Sinn Féin supports the introduction of termination of pregnancy only in very clearly defined circumstances. Abortion should be available where a woman's life, health or mental health is at risk; in cases of fatal foetal abnormality; and in cases where pregnancy has occurred as a result of rape, incest or sexual abuse. We do not support abortion on grounds of non-fatal foetal abnormality. Our party policy on that issue is absolutely crystal clear. That is what our party members voted for, and it has nothing to do with populism or opportunism.

The motion proposed by the DUP today is a rejection of any legislation that would permit abortion here under any circumstances. Sinn Féin will not support that position; if our amendment falls, we will vote against the DUP motion.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: No, I am not giving way.

Abortions have been taking place for many years — even centuries. Previously, most were backstreet abortions, with all the attendant health risks and dangers for the woman. More recently, women from here have had to make lonely and traumatic journeys across the water to access abortion, often incurring significant financial cost. More importantly, they frequently had to travel without the family support and emotional solidarity they would have had if they could access the same healthcare here at home. In this technological age, women and girls have been accessing abortion pills on the internet and taking them without medical supervision. That is an unacceptable situation, and that is where the DUP wants to bring us back to. They are entitled, of course, to do that. However, it is beneath contempt that they have cynically tried to manipulate emotions around Down's syndrome children in an attempt to undermine the right of women to modern and compassionate healthcare and to roll back the progress that we have seen belatedly on this issue. That is why Sinn

Féin brought forward its amendment and why it is totally and absolutely opposed to the DUP motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call on Paul Givan to conclude the debate on the substantive motion.

Mr Givan: I thank all Members for taking part in the debate. I thank those who have spoken in support of the motion and for the measured and respectful way that they have engaged in the debate. I thank Members who have indicated concerns, again, for the respectful way that have done that. Some of the language has been regrettable: “cynical exploitation” and “playing politics”. That is not the case. The attack on Sinn Féin by Clare Bailey and Gerry Carroll is highly regrettable. Similarly, they used the same language against Sinn Féin that Sinn Féin used in respect of those who support the motion, and I think that is regrettable. We need to debate this in a very sensitive and measured way.

On non-fatal disability, Sinn Féin accepts that both lives matter. We accept that both lives matter in many more circumstances. Supporting both lives is vital.

It is important to acknowledge the contributions that Members made, and I thank them for that. I thank the Member for East Belfast Joanne Bunting for opening the debate and for her powerful contribution, and that of others. My appreciation is to Members who spoke in support of the motion, in particular Robbie Butler and Rosemary Barton. I thank Patsy McGlone and Dolores Kelly for their support and the approach that they have taken on this issue in advance of the debate today. That cross-party and cross-community approach is a demonstration of the shared values that we have.

This issue is not a DUP issue, it is an issue for all of us. For Assembly Members today, as in the past, when I worked with people such as Pat Ramsey, Alban Maginness, Danny Kennedy and indeed the late Seamus Close, it is something that we have common cause in and can work together on.

It is extraordinary that the UK Government should have included in these abortion regulations a provision that is years out of date and would be a regressive and backwards step in the campaign against discrimination and equality for people with disabilities. In 1995, we had the advent of the Disability Discrimination Act, and, in 2009, the UK signed up to and ratified the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. Yet, here we are with a law that invites us to view viable human beings that have non-fatal disabilities as less deserving of the protection of the law than viable human beings of the same age who are not disabled. We are dealing with a law that lays the foundations for fatal discrimination. It is discrimination that says that someone's life can be ended because of their disability. Regulation 7(1)(b) and regulation 13 are, quite simply, extraordinary, and it will bring shame on the UK Government and Westminster if they approve them later this month.

It is enough to completely devastate any person with a non-fatal disability, such as Heidi Crowter, or anyone who has such a person in their family. No one can spend time with Heidi, or anyone with Down's syndrome, and feel that that would be acceptable.

I had the pleasure, as colleagues have said, of speaking with Heidi, a remarkable woman who celebrates her

birthday on 4 July, Independence Day. There she is, campaigning for her equality of treatment and for freedom for people like her, who have the chance of being born with Down's syndrome. Her life has been one full of joy and happiness and she is due to get married later this month to James. When we listen to Heidi speaking of being deeply hurt and offended by this legislation, that she is viewed as being less valued than other people, that should make all of us moved with compassion and compelled to take action.

Many of us will know people in those circumstances. The oldest person in the UK and Ireland with Down's syndrome, George, celebrated his 76th birthday yesterday. His family gave their support to this motion, saying, “We love our wee brother. He has brought us so much love and joy. He has had a great life”. My great-uncle, my father's Uncle Samuel, had Down's syndrome. He lived for 57 years and he had a love for animals. My father speaks about the tremendous work ethic that he had on the farm and what joy he brought to that family. I never had the opportunity to meet him. The idea that Down's syndrome is some huge problem that should be addressed by abortion is chilling, and it suggests a complete lack of interest in how people with Down's syndrome and their families see the world.

7.15 pm

The problems with regulations 7 and 13, however, do not pertain just to what they do but to the way in which they were developed. The story of these regulations is a litany of constitutional abuses that no self-respecting democracy should ever countenance. The regulations are the result of a vote to change abortion law in Northern Ireland in which the votes of actual MPs who represent the people of Northern Ireland were silenced by the votes of other MPs, none of whom represent this place. The legislation, pushed through via an amendment to an unrelated Bill that was subject to accelerated procedure, should never have been the case. The original amendment, tabled and commended by Clare Bailey in the name of Stella Creasy, was so incoherent that, rather than amending it, the House of Lords totally rewrote it. Then, the entire new provision was sent back to MPs, and they had only 17 minutes' worth of a fragmented debate, which took place around Brexit, and they passed a vote, but not specifically on that amendment from the House of Lords, which was grouped with wider amendments. I will give way to Mr Lunn.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for giving way. He could perhaps help me to decide which way to vote on the DUP motion if he would explain what the DUP's position is here. Is the intention, as I gathered from Mrs Bunting's excellent speech, to concentrate on the one clause, 7(1)(b), to try to get that changed, or is it what Mrs Cameron appeared to let out of the bag, which is, frankly, a much wider discussion about the abortion Act in total? If he could clarify that for me, it would help a lot.

Mr Givan: I will. I am going to address that point as I conclude. The Member does raise a valid point, and I can understand why he makes it.

Up until that point, it was Parliament that had treated Northern Ireland badly, but from here on in, the Conservative Government made matters worse. In the first instance, they had a consultation on the regulations that was much shorter than the usual 12 weeks, especially on controversial topics; it lasted six weeks, and only four of those days were outside of a general election campaign. In

the second instance, they completely ignored the fact that 79% of respondents said, "Please, do not do this". Then, the Secretary of State proceeded to develop regulations in a way that undermined devolution to a greater extent than Parliament actually required. That point has been spelt out in a legal opinion by one of our leading constitutional lawyers, David Scoffield QC.

It would have been bad enough had the Secretary of State compounded the undermining of devolution in a context where the Assembly was suspended, but he continued with that approach even after the restoration of devolution. If that is not bad enough, the body charged by the UK Government with checking these regulations, uniquely, had no representation from Northern Ireland. That meant that regulations that relate only to Northern Ireland were checked by a UK Parliament body consisting of Scottish, English and Welsh parliamentarians.

There are other concerns in respect of the regulations. Regulation 4 provides access to abortion up to 24 weeks on the same basis as GB. Dolores Kelly outlined concerns on that, and I do not intend to repeat them.

The way in which the abortion regulations were developed by the UK Parliament and the UK Government show that they have treated Northern Ireland with contempt. No Member of this Assembly would tolerate the Executive or a Minister acting in that way. In this context, it does not seem appropriate for this Assembly to go out of its way to infer that it is prepared to accept other aspects of these regulations, beyond 7 and 13, when the manner of their development as a whole has involved meting out to Northern Ireland such a litany of constitutional abuses.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. I ask sincerely, does he take any responsibility for the passage of this legislation being as a result of failed leadership in Northern Ireland?

Mr Givan: Let me just deal with that point. We are where we are today. Clare made that point. We can go over what happened in the past, but Members are asked to deal with the circumstances today. Viewing this through a prism of wanting to be politically critical of a party and its approach in the past, whether it is right or not, does a disservice to what you are being asked to consider today. I know that there are Members who have wrestled with how they should vote on this matter. I understand the sincere considerations that you have about giving your support to the motion. Today is not about me; it is not about my party. The issue is much too important for that. I know that not everyone will agree with my position and I may not agree with their position, but we should all agree, as elected representatives of the people, that we take responsibility for reflecting the values of our society in the Assembly and should seek to reach common ground. I appeal to Members —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Givan: I appeal to Members: if you cannot listen to me, hear the voice of Heidi Crowter and people like her. I ask Members to support the motion as tabled.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Clear the Lobbies.

The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that they should continue to uphold social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

Before the Assembly divides, I want to remind you that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. It is important that, during any Division, social distancing in the Chamber continues to be observed. To facilitate this, I ask that any Members in the Chamber who are not due to vote in person consider leaving the Chamber until the Division has concluded. Those Members who wish to vote in the Lobbies on the opposite side of the Chamber to where they are sitting should leave the Chamber by the nearest door and enter the relevant Lobby via the Rotunda. Those remaining Members who are sitting closest to the Lobby doors should enter the Lobbies first. Any Member who has voted may then wish to leave the Chamber until the Division has concluded. However, any Member who needs to vote in both Lobbies should not leave the Chamber. I remind Members of the need to be patient at all times, to follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks and to respect the need for social distancing.

Question, that the amendment be made, put a second time.

The Assembly divided.

Ayes 32; Noes 52.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald and Ms Sheerin.

NOES

Mr Allister, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Blair, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Miss McIlveen, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Mr Newton, Mr O'Toole, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stafford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Barton and Ms Bunting.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Durkan, Ms Mallon, Mr Nesbitt

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting [Teller, Noes], Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald [Teller, Ayes], Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin [Teller, Ayes].

Miss Woods voted for Ms Bailey.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I wish to allow Members a few moments to come back into the Chamber, so we will pause for a moment.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 46; Noes 40.

AYES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Barton and Ms Bunting.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Ms Sugden, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Archibald and Ms Sheerin.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Ms Hunter

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting [Teller, Ayes], Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald [Teller, Noes], Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin [Teller, Noes].

Miss Woods voted for Ms Bailey.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the important intervention of disability campaigner Heidi Crowter and rejects the imposition of abortion legislation that extends to all non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that the next plenary sitting of the Assembly is on Tuesday 9 June.

Adjourned at 8.07 pm.

Ad Hoc Committee on the
COVID-19 Response

Official Report
(Hansard)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

30 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Pat Catney
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Philip McGuigan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Edwin Poots
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr John Stewart

Witnesses:

Dr Denis McMahon Department of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members, agenda item 3 is a statement from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The Speaker's Office received notification on 27 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to today's meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. A copy of the statement can be found in your pack at page 15.

I welcome the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to the meeting. I also welcome Mr Denis McMahon, the permanent secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), who is accompanying the Minister.

I invite the Minister to make his statement, which should be heard without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions. Given how well we all did with the Minister of Health earlier, we

should stick to that format: short, sharp questions without long preambles or introductions.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Deputy Chairperson. I am grateful for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee today. I want to speak to you about the arrangements that are being made in my Department to support the people of Northern Ireland in these challenging and, indeed, worrying times.

As leaders, each of us must continue to do what we can to help everyone through the crisis. As well as impacting the health of our people, the pandemic is driving economic, social and environmental change, so, while we need to address the problems of today, we also need to keep our eye to the future. The world will have changed in the aftermath of COVID-19 and we will have changed with it.

We must sustain our efforts to help and comfort each other through the personal challenges brought by the disease. We must work together and maximise cooperation between people, businesses and the public sector to get through these difficult times. We must address the economic and social challenges that we can see and that are emerging in the wake of the public health impacts, and we must begin to plan to ensure that, as we leave this dark hour, we are prepared to renew ourselves, our economy and our environment.

As the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I am committed to ensuring that we make every possible effort to protect the health and well-being of our staff, our customers and the general public and to ensure that we continue to carry out our essential services safely.

On the theme of working together, we have made it a priority to work with and support others across the system. That is consistent with our aim as a Department, because protecting the environment and public health are key priorities for DAERA under all circumstances. I am, therefore, very grateful that DAERA has been able to provide Belfast City Hospital with 30 powered respirator units, which will undoubtedly contribute to saving lives. The Chief Veterinary Officer is working with the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to provide veterinary resources, which will assist with COVID contact tracing and, potentially, assist healthcare professionals in the trust area. Our College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise has made over 20,000 coveralls and other personal protective equipment (PPE) available to the

health and social care trusts and to colleagues in the Department's veterinary service animal health group, some of which have already been collected.

DAERA continues to undertake a vast amount of work to ensure that we can deliver essential services to the people of Northern Ireland and, with your agreement, I will update you on that programme.

As many of you will be aware, we have a huge spread of responsibility, including the agri-food industry, waste, fisheries, the environment and the rural sector. Each and every one of us comes into contact with at least one of those services daily, but, most of the time, they are hidden from view. Many people do not even realise that they are there, which is a good thing, because it shows that they are working. However, if there is one thing that we have learned in the crisis, it is that we should cherish those services and never take them for granted.

We provide food for some 10 million people, so it is crucial that our supply chains do not falter. I want to pay tribute to everyone across the private and public sectors, from farm to fork, for maintaining those supply chains so well. Those supply chains are working effectively thanks to the dedication and commitment of workers in the chains.

It is entirely understandable that there have been concerns across stakeholders that staff may contract the virus and that they could be unable to work. I am grateful, therefore, to everybody who has helped put safety measures in place. When the industry made calls for their key workers to be tested for COVID-19, we listened. In fact, we have listened at every stage, meeting with the industry at least once a week and, for the majority of the crisis, two or three times a week.

We are currently working with agri-food stakeholders to identify the categories and numbers of key workers, private and public sector, that could be tested to inform government planning exercises. Estimates from the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Association (NIFDA) suggest that output from the sector remains at around 100% in terms of meeting customer demands. Levels of absenteeism are reported as having reduced to 8-5% on average from a high of 14%.

As the crisis continues, however, there is concern that farm incomes could fall due to a COVID-19-related slump in market prices. That could be made worse if farmers cannot get product to market or get feed, or if input prices rise. We must ensure, as far as we can, that the flow of produce from farms is not interrupted. Thankfully, that has not happened to date, and, hopefully, the risk of it is receding, although we cannot rule out future problems.

Industry representatives have raised concerns that a sharp fall in beef prices is on the way. The latest market statistics show that beef prices, which had been stable since the beginning of the year, have started to fall. There are also concerns about what lies ahead for the dairy sector, because international markets have weakened considerably in recent weeks. We know also that there are difficulties in ornamental horticulture, with dedicated growers facing major difficulties in getting produce to markets.

I can assure you that my Department is working diligently with representatives of the red meat and dairy sectors, listening and offering support and guidance. More

importantly, we are taking action where we can. Officials are in daily contact with the industry on those matters and have recently received independent analysis of the impacts that COVID-19 is having on both production and processing in the red meat industry. A similar industry-sponsored report for the dairy sector is expected by the end of next week. We are closely monitoring local, national and international markets to obtain information and intelligence. Both streams of work will go some way to help us develop and deliver the type of support that may be needed to weather this particular storm.

Moving on to fisheries, my Department has provided a substantial scheme of £1.5 million worth of support for the sea fish catching sector, and letters of invitation to apply for the scheme have been issued. Some vessels continue to fish where there is a market for the catch, but overall activity is greatly reduced due to the market collapse for fish. There has also been a severe drop in sales of aquaculture products.

DAERA officials have been gathering the relevant economic information to examine the extent of the impact and what measures might be necessary to support the sector. That includes consideration of the recent amendment to the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), which provides the possibility of granting financial compensation to aquaculture farmers for the temporary suspension or reduction of production as a result of COVID-19. Additionally, as a result of the drop in sales, increased stocking densities may increase welfare and disease issues. The Department continues to engage with the sector on these matters.

My officials have been working tirelessly with farmers to assist them in completing their single farm applications. With less than three weeks to the closing date for single applications, DAERA's single application advisory service will be available from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm over the weekends of the 5 and 6 of May and the 12 and 13 of May.

We are providing enhanced advisory services and have seen a substantial increase in the number of applications that have been received to date. The latest figure for received applications is 13,188. That represents 53% of the total number of applications expected in 2020, and an increase of 23% compared with the same date in 2019. I welcome that increased rate of applications by farmers and agents and encourage those with applications outstanding to act now. The deadline for entitlement transfers is 4 May 2020 and the deadline for single applications is 15 May 2020.

My Department will continue to do all that it can to ease the burden and worries of people and businesses in rural communities. DAERA officials are working in collaboration with a wide range of delivery partners in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors. In the past three weeks I have secured £2.5m for DAERA for the 2020-21 tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme. I have pushed that support towards dealing with the immediate impacts of COVID-19 in the rural sector and I have also fast-tracked over £2 million in payments to projects. Those payments will support rural businesses and the community and voluntary sector, providing them with some degree of assistance and security during these difficult times.

Rural Support has reported an influx of calls to its helpline on a range of issues. Those have included farmers worrying about benefits, their mental health and a possible

slowdown in the supply chain. Rural Support continues to provide a listening ear and help. Working in tandem with local councils and the Department for Communities, DAERA people and vehicles are delivering food parcels to the most vulnerable people in our communities, ensuring that they can keep safe.

The Minister for Infrastructure and I recently confirmed a collective arrangement for rural community transport partnerships (RCTPs). Those partnerships play a key role in delivering services to rural people and communities. Working in tandem with local councils and health trusts, the RCTPs are proving to be a very effective means of delivering food, medicine and other services to vulnerable people.

Last week, I confirmed that forest and country parks were open for pedestrian access. The purpose of that is to provide people with open green spaces to exercise, consistent with public health advice on social distancing. In doing so, it is important that people maintain compliance with the COVID-19 regulations, including where there is reasonable excuse to travel for exercise. Car parks, as well as caravan, camping, angling and associated facilities remain closed.

DAERA continues to deliver key public health and environmental protection messages around waste management. Those messages cover issues including bin hygiene, respect for key workers, the importance of recycling and warnings against fly-tipping.

Waste industry workers have been designated as key workers and I have issued a letter to all those who are working in the waste industry, thanking them for their continued work and recognising their role. The waste sector is vital in safeguarding public health, protecting the environment and servicing the economy. Waste and recycling services are critical public services. They should be maintained as far as possible in order to protect the health of the Northern Ireland public from a build-up of waste, safeguard the important flow of materials — such as materials that are needed for food packaging — and to deliver a low-carbon circular economy agenda.

I recognise that there has been an increase in reports of fly-tipping and I have used a range of communications to remind the public that it is not only illegal but damaging to public health and the environment. Our waste workers are already burdened with increased household waste, so fly-tipping is a further burden on them. An added risk in dry weather is that fly-tipping increases the risk of wildfires. I have approved guidance to councils to inform their decisions on the reopening of household waste recycling centres. Clearly, those decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis, but as these services start again when the time is right, they will help to reduce fly-tipping incidents. I also assure members that my officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) are closely monitoring the situation and are working with our local councils.

NIEA staff are continuing to operate their 24-hour pollution response service as part of their work to protect our waterbodies. That is particularly important in catchments that supply drinking water and it is why scientific staff in our laboratories are prioritising their work on analysing raw water quality samples. That will support Northern Ireland Water's provision of safe drinking water and effective waste water treatment. In addition, NIEA's drinking water inspectorate is working closely with Northern Ireland Water

to ensure that it maintains the required drinking water standards for all of its customers and for those who use a private water supply.

I also wish to acknowledge the valuable contribution of environmental non-government organisations and recognise the impacts of COVID-19 on that sector. DAERA staff continue to work with them and with other government colleagues to understand and seek a way forward.

My Department and I remain fully committed to playing our part in tackling the crisis. We will ensure that every effort is made to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Importantly, we understand that that means not only helping ourselves and our stakeholders, but reaching out and helping as many people as possible.

As we push on and continue to deliver those essential services that we can deliver safely, it is important to remember that we will recover. Over recent weeks and months, we have been forced to live and work differently and to behave differently. I pay tribute to everyone who has played their part, but even in these darkest times we need to look ahead. We owe it to everyone to ensure that everything we have learned in facing these challenges is put to good use. When planning for recovery, it is crucial that we do so in a holistic manner; everything must work in tandem. DAERA has developed new and innovative ways of working; travelling less, using less energy and finding new ways to communicate and learn. We must take that learning with us and use it in developing future plans. I pay tribute to the staff throughout the wider agri-food industry, including my staff in DAERA, for their dedication and commitment through this time. For many of them, the impact of COVID-19 on their work is far more profound than just changing where they work; it has also fundamentally changed the work that they do and how they do it.

Rather than picking up where we left off, we must reimagine the future. We must work across government and with the private and voluntary/community sectors to co-design and deliver social and economic renewal. Sustainability must be at the heart of what we do, and economic renewal must better recognise the importance of our environment as a pathway towards a sustainable future. That will require collective commitment and action, and I recognise the important role that the Northern Ireland Executive will have to play. I will also continue to work with Executive colleagues to do whatever I can to get us through the current crisis and to play a full part in the development of a recovery plan for Northern Ireland.

In my statement to this Committee on 7 April 2020, I informed members that my Department had already started developing proposals to support the recovery of our economy, environment and people. That work continues as we reflect on our enforced experience of COVID-19 and examine the lessons that we can learn from it and how we can take them forward to optimise flexibility, productivity and resilience. I look forward to sharing them with you in the coming weeks.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Thank you very much, Minister, for your statement.

Folks, the guts of 20 members want to speak. Let us have short, focused questions from members. If we ask members to do that, we should also ask for short, focused answers from the Minister.

Mr McAleer (Committee Chair - Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): First, I express my condolences to Minister Poots on the sad passing of his father last week. No doubt, your grief and that of your family have been compounded by the current COVID crisis and the requirements to maintain distance, including from loved ones. Minister, I pass on my condolences to you and thank you very much for being here today.

Minister, on page 2 of your statement, you refer to the slump in farm-gate prices. That is obviously due to many factors, including COVID, that have resulted in a severe carcass imbalance, brought on by the closure of the food services industry. It has created a severe crisis for farmers. Last week and the week before, we received estimates of a potential £105 million package to be co-funded by the EU and the Westminster Government to support the agri-food industry. Will the Minister give us an update on where we are with that support package?

Mr Poots: I thank the Committee Chair for his question. I also thank him for expressing his condolences and for doing so personally. I am greatly appreciative of that from every member who has contacted me on a personal basis. I genuinely appreciate it.

We have been pressing the UK Government, in particular, on the matter that the member asked about. Last week, Europe produced a package that, I believe, amounted to €80 million for all of Europe and was largely aids to private storage. That is better than a poke in the eye, but it is not a lot in terms of the crisis that exists across the European Union. We were looking at estimating a figure over the next year of around £100 million being required for Northern Ireland. That demonstrates the scale of what, we believe, the problem will be and the response thus far. I do not believe that Europe or the UK Government have responded in the way that is needed. There is a holding back to see what will happen, whilst some of the things that will happen are quite evident. In a very short space of time, the hospitality industry closed down — it was basically overnight — and, with that, 40% of the trade that is done through the agri-food sector disappeared. The consequence is very obvious when you are hit with 40% of your trade disappearing. Yes, the retailers picked up a decent amount of trade, but they did not fill that gap or go anywhere near it.

I presented to the Executive last week on our requirement for funding. We received £912 million; I think there is something like £80 million of that left. Transportation has a call on that, and I recognise the importance of transportation, especially in keeping our haulage industry going and keeping the ferries operating. However, I have encouraged Executive colleagues not to spend that money just at this time and to ensure that there is something left for agriculture in the absence of the UK Government stepping up to the plate, albeit that my focus continues to be on the UK Government. I have good support from my Scots and Welsh colleagues, and I think that we need to continue to maintain the pressure, because there is a problem. It is not a short-term problem; it will probably last for close to a year. The biggest issue is that this has been caused by COVID-19. We have helped other businesses to be there after COVID-19, and we need to ensure that we help the agri-food sector to be there, particularly given its importance to Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr McAleer, would you like to ask a supplementary question?

Mr McAleer: I am sure that the Minister will welcome the recent confirmation that farmers can apply for the self-employed income support scheme, but he will be aware that many farms, particularly those in areas of natural constraint, are lucky to break even year on year, so the self-employed scheme will not be of particular use to them. Does the Minister see any benefit in introducing a small grant scheme, not unlike the one that was introduced by the Economy Minister for other small businesses, to support those small farmers, even as an interim solution until a wider package is agreed by Westminster and the EU Governments?

Mr Poots: I think the beef industry across Northern Ireland made around £8 million last year. When you divide that across all of the beef farms, be they on the uplands or the lowlands, it is a modest amount of money. The dairy farms, I think, made closer to £60 million, and all the projections are that they will not make anything this year. Therefore, what I commit to is that, if we can get an envelope of money, I will come to the AERA Committee before we spend it, to get the thoughts of the representatives here on how that should be spent. We need to customise it for Northern Ireland and the people whom we serve, and therefore I am happy to work with all the colleagues here, if we can get an envelope of money, to ensure that it is appropriately spent and goes to the places that need it most.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his statement and pass on my condolences on the passing of his father. I can assure him that our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family at this time.

The Minister may be aware that some farmers are finding it difficult to get their TB tests done. Can the Minister further review the TB testing controls as a result of COVID-19, to ensure that animals can be tested, while protecting human life?

Mr Poots: A level of TB testing continues. Some vets are furloughed, and some practices are not carrying out TB testing. I can confirm that, where practices are not carrying out TB testing and farmers in those areas need to have TB tests, they can go to a different practice. Previously, that was not allowed; you had to go to the practice that was designated by the Department. However, if that practice is not actually practising in terms of TB testing, then you can go to a different veterinary practice. If that practice is content that social distancing can be achieved, that veterinary practice can carry it out. We have also further amended TB testing so that calves under the age of 180 days — up to six months of age — will not have to be TB tested. Therefore, where farms have calves being born and need to move them on, those calves will not have to be TB tested before they move. We recognise the issues and problems that the farming community faces with TB testing and are seeking to work with farmers to provide the service to them.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Would you like a supplementary, Mr Irwin?

Mr Irwin: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his response and for the announcement that animals up to six months of age will not have to be TB-tested. That will be welcomed.

I had an issue just the other day with departmental vets. The Department was to test a particular farmer's animals, but it would not do so, nor would it let his own vet do so. We did get it resolved in the end, but is the Minister aware that that can be an issue?

Mr Poots: Once again, Irwin has delivered, as they say. He got a result in the end. I am glad that the Department worked with you to get the result, and I hope that it would be the case that any MLAs who bring an issue to my Department get the cooperation that they deserve. If they do not get the cooperation that they deserve, they should feel free to contact me, and I will try to ensure that they do.

Mr Catney: Minister, I also pass on my condolences to your family on the passing of your father, Charlie. I know that he was a freeman and a tireless worker in the community. Not always might I have seen eye to eye with him, but he was out to help and to do his possible best. I am disappointed that I was not able to attend your house, because, the night after the death of my mother, who died on a Thursday six weeks ago, you, Minister, were first at my door, at six o'clock. I commend him for that. I would love to have been able to go back and share in his grief at his family home. I am sorry that I was not able to.

Minister, you will be aware that many farmers reinvest any profits that they make in their farm. As a result, their profit returns are non-existent or minimal. Those farmers may be disadvantaged by the self-employed scheme. Does the Minister have a view on how we can support them?

Mr Poots: In response to your first comments, Mr Catney, that is how we should deal with each other. We should have that respect for each other when there are family bereavements and so on. It was my privilege to attend your home at that time, and I regret that you were not able to attend mine. Had the scenario been different, you would have been very welcome, as others would have been. That people were not able to attend my home is something of regret, but we just have to get on with it.

The point that you raised is extremely valid. Farmers tend to pump money back into their business, so profitability is low. They will repair a roof if they can afford it or put down a bit more concrete to tidy up a yard, or whatever it happens to be. They will make something better or more comfortable for the animals. Sometimes it will be more comfortable than their own dwelling. As a consequence, profitability is low. Many of them will therefore fall outside of the terms of the scheme. That is why it is critical that we identify a source of funding, wherever it is from. I very much hope that it comes from the UK Government. If not, the Executive should step up to the plate and provide support to keep those small businesspeople — farmers are small businesspeople — afloat and allow them to continue to practise. I make that very clear here, and I have made it clear to the Executive. There are 100,000 people who depend on the agri-food business in Northern Ireland, and it is important, when we get to the other side of COVID-19 and beyond, that we still have opportunities for those 100,000 people and that we can continue to grow the business.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Would you like a supplementary?

Mr Catney: Yes. Thanks very much, Minister, for your answers. As I heard in your statement, your Department is also forward-thinking when it comes to how we can

reinvest when we come out of this crisis. Captain Tom has raised £30 million, and the British Prime Minister stated today that he is a beacon of light. We need that beacon of light. That beacon of light can shine through our town centres and shopfronts. Minister, you talk about the reinvestment that your Department is going to do. If we learn nothing else from this, we learn that we need to think seriously about a campaign of shopping local and supporting the businesses that are on our doorstep.

Mr Poots: That is a very valid point, and I am happy to work with the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities beyond this crisis on a recovery plan of shopping locally. The best way of ensuring that people buy locally is to shop locally. Traditionally, local businesses have supported people in their community. People have been enticed away from some local shops. We have seen the shutters go up while others increase their buying power. It would be wonderful to see all our butchers, bakeries, fruit and vegetable stores and artisan shops making a comeback and grasping the chance to make something good out of COVID-19.

The lesson that we all need to learn from any crisis is that opportunities will arise as a result of it, and we need to grab those opportunities with both hands. If restoring locally owned business were to come out of COVID-19, that would be really good for this country.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I call the next member to speak, I remind members that, although I am keen to give everyone a supplementary, if they want one, there is no obligation to take it. I am not trying to put any particular pressure on Mrs Rosemary Barton.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I convey my deepest sympathy to you and your family on your recent bereavement.

Minister, I noted that you said that about 53% of the expected single farm payment applications have already been received. Those are due in on 15 May, which is coming very close. You know that we have broadband issues in the west. I do not need to reiterate them. Is there any possibility, given COVID-19, social distancing and the fact that many of these people get support from throughout the community, that the date of receipt for those applications could be put back for a week or 10 days to help them?

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mrs Barton, for another very valid question. At this stage, the figure of 53% is tremendous. We are 20% ahead of previous years, which is good, but I recognise that it will be a struggle for everyone, particularly when they are relying on others for form filling and there are not the same opportunities to call at a farm and get all the information down. Filling out the forms, and doing so accurately, will be more challenging.

People need to get their forms in. If people are concerned that their form is not completely accurate, they have until 9 June to amend it, without penalty, which gives them a bit of time. I do not think that now is the appropriate time to take our foot off the pedal. Our farmers are doing very well. If I were to say today that we would put it back until 30 May, I might be pushed to put it back to 15 June or whenever. I could put it back for a month — not a problem — but I do not want to put back the payment date of 16 October by a month. Consequently, I want to keep the pressure on and get as many of these applications in as possible. Towards

the end, we will see whether there is a real problem. If so, we will work with people to try to address it.

At this time, the best thing to do is to keep the focus on 15 May. Let us see what we can achieve by then. I will not be surprised if the farming community has 98% or 99% of applications in by that point. At that stage, there would be very little excuse for the remaining 1% or 2%, but we will see how it goes.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): A supplementary, Mrs Barton?

Mrs Barton: If you will give me slight leeway, I want to comment on DAERA and broadband. I find it a little disturbing that £14.3 million has been set aside in the DAERA budget for digital transformation, yet the amount for broadband is £7.5 million. I would have thought that, given the need in the community for broadband, perhaps it should be the other way round.

Mr Poots: I refer that one to my permanent secretary.

Dr Denis McMahon (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): My expectation is that that money should be going to broadband. I will need to look at that.

Mrs Barton: Thank you.

Mr Blair: I add my condolences and those of my party colleagues to the condolences already expressed. In addition, I pay tribute to the Minister and, given that he is back to business and answering our questions so soon, the seriousness with which he takes these pressing and crucial issues. Following the Minister's appropriate thanks to those involved in the supply chain, could I ask if he shares my concern that we may need additional workers to enable the harvest to happen effectively this year? Although it is still early in the year and we may not be seeing the strain yet, I am sure that he would agree that there is a possibility that the need for social distancing and the lack of migrant workers could create pressures.

Mr Poots: We in Northern Ireland do not have the same fruit market that exists in other parts. Certainly, strawberry and raspberry growers in the south of England are facing problems. We see planeloads of people arriving from Romania, and people criticised that. You know what? I am glad of those people from Romania coming in to do it. The Government offered people who are furloughed the opportunity to keep their furlough money and go to work on those farms, and people chose not to do it. So, thank you to the people who have come in to do it.

We in Northern Ireland do not have the same pressures. The apple industry is the one that is least automated and, consequently, needs quite a bit of help in the autumn. We will keep an eye on the issue and address it as we get closer to that time. I am sure that Mr Irwin and other Newry and Armagh and Upper Bann colleagues will keep our attention on that matter if it arises.

Mr Blair: Does the Minister agree that we may well need cross-sector and cross-departmental attention to try to address issues as they arise?

Mr Poots: I do.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Minister. First, can I say publicly that I am sorry for your loss on the recent passing of your dear father, Charlie? Indeed, I have fond memories of him

serving as a Member of this House in 1973 and 1975 along with my father, Cecil.

Minister, I welcome the clarity that you have given on the use of forest and country parks. How is this working out in practice?

Mr Poots: I thank the member for the question. To date, we have had no issues raised with us by the public. It appears to be working well. We have sought to discourage people from travelling, and certainly from travelling long distances. We have kept car parks locked so that people will not be encouraged to travel. It is more local people who are using the facilities.

As things stand, there are no ice-cream vans, coffee vans or anything else in the parks, and that is how it will have to be for the foreseeable. We have encouraged people to use one-way systems in the parks. Social distancing has worked extremely well. I welcome the opportunity for people to get out into the fresh air; it is good for their physical and mental health. We want people to use these services; that is why they are here. The Northern Ireland public pay for these services. We want the Northern Ireland public to benefit from them, and they are benefiting from them in a way that will not contribute to any upsurge in COVID-19.

Mr Harvey: I had a supplementary on car parking, but you more or less answered it. There is no availability but you say that everything is working out fine, so that is grand.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I do not think that you need to respond to that.

Mr Poots: No.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for his statement and echo the condolences to you on the death of your father.

Following on from Mrs Barton's question — and I have written to you about this — in light of the COVID-19 crisis that we find ourselves in and the fact that we have social-distancing requirements, DAERA staff working from home and farm agents also working remotely meaning that a lot of farmers are not able to go and speak to their agents in the way that they did previously, will flexibility be granted to farmers who are going to miss the 4 May deadline for the transfer of their single farm payment entitlements?

Mr Poots: We have not put in flexibility for the entitlement transfers at this stage — there is flexibility as regards mistakes on the single farm payment form — but we can certainly give consideration to that if it is required.

Ms Sheerin: I appreciate that. In the response that I received, you referred to the online form. I just want to reiterate that a lot of my constituents have poor broadband and a lot of farmers are elderly and living in rural isolation, so accessing the form online is not always ideal.

Mr Poots: I respect that as well, and I know that in our area, Sky broadband went down for, I think, 48 hours recently. As we get closer to the time, that could very easily happen and cause a distortion in the community. So, we need to recognise *[Inaudible]* always delivers.

Mr T Buchanan: I extend my condolences to the Minister and assure him of our thoughts and prayers at this time.

Minister, going back to single farm payments, I note from your statement that applications this year are 23% higher

than last year. With the high level of applications, are you confident that the basic scheme payments can be delivered by mid-October, or will it be a longer process?

Mr Poots: I am very hopeful that the farming community will respond; 15 May is the date that they recognise needs to be met every year. People have started well, and that has continued to be the case. There has been no drop-off. There has been an increase. If we encourage people to keep at it, I believe that we can get most of these forms in on time.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for that. Given that we are in the midst of COVID-19 and that working from home makes it much more difficult for staff, can the Minister give an assurance that staff will be at hand to give that needed advice and assistance to those farmers who have a difficulty with their single farm payment application?

Mr Poots: We have more telephone helplines than ever, and we are offering a helpline service at weekends. I think that that is open between 9:00 am and 3:00 pm on Saturdays and Sundays, and that will be an additional service that is provided to people for the two weekends before 15 May.

Ms Ennis: I, too, echo the sentiments expressed on the passing of your father, Minister.

Communities and farmers alike have been sounding the alarm about the surge in fly-tipping and illegal dumping. Has the Department sought to keep track of the level of that? Have you looked at any COVID-proof policy initiatives to combat that highly irresponsible and, quite frankly, disgusting activity?

Mr Poots: NIEA have been working to support local authorities on tracing and identifying fly-tipping. It has increased, not alarmingly, but it has increased, and that is a significant issue for us to deal with. We have set out principles on the matter. They were not my principles but were produced by NIEA without any political guidance, and I happen to agree with them. Those principles have now been issued to councils for them to deal with household waste centres. I hope that councils will respond. For example, in the Mid Ulster council area recently, fly-tipping waste was set alight, which started a gorse fire and created a secondary problem. It is for councils to make their own decisions, and I respect the fact that they cherish their independence. I hope that the guidance enables them to make decisions that allow them to better manage waste.

Ms Ennis: If you will indulge me, Principal Deputy Speaker, I will go off topic slightly. We have heard a lot about and know from our own experience how rural clubs and rural communities are at the coalface of the civic response to COVID-19. I appeal to the Minister and implore him to consider implementing a rural development programme by way of a post-COVID stimulus package, especially for rural communities. Has he engaged with the shared prosperity fund to bring that forward?

Mr Poots: I have a written statement ready to go on rural needs. I wanted to include it in this oral statement, but I was told by officials that it needed to go out in written form. You will be getting that, and I think that we will be in a position to respond to that. We probably have a lot of work to do with the Department for Communities on meeting rural needs. That Department has money for sporting clubs, for example, and, indeed, £22 million that came

through for charities. That is the Department that has the finances on that. I hope that all of that does not stay in urban areas, not that I have anything against urban people, but the money should be spread across the communities and, of course, include rural communities.

Mr McGrath: While there is much in this House that will divide us, there is a humanity that brings us together. Many of us know the loss of a parent and the loss of a father, and I offer my condolences to the Minister on his loss.

I welcome the support that there has been for the fishing communities. That £1.5 million has been of great benefit to those in the fishing communities in my constituency in Ardglass and Kilkeel. Given that the trade in fish going into restaurant businesses and the food sector is not likely to be back on its feet again in two, three or maybe even six months, is there long-term planning within the Department to support those industries?

Mr Poots: There are indications that some markets are starting to open up again. You are absolutely right. Of the fish that we catch locally, we do not use it locally. We use about 30% of it, and about 70% of it is exported. Of the fish that we actually use, about 70% is imported. We like cod and chips on a Saturday night; others like our nephrops and our prawns, and a lot of that goes to the Far East and a lot goes to the Continent. The Far East market appears to be beginning to open up, but it is going to be a while, because a lot of the chilled containers and so forth are actually in China and they need to be got out to start movement again.

So, we will watch the markets and work to support the industry and work with it. At this stage, there is still quite a lot of buying going on. That material is going into cold stores. Ultimately that has to be sold at some stage, so it will probably mean that the price of fish will not rise any time soon, even if the markets are opened up again. Then, of course, we are all living with the cloud of a second outbreak over us and we are finding it challenging to deal with the first outbreak. We do not exactly know what the future holds but we just need to be prepared to be flexible whenever that comes along.

Mr McGrath: Likewise in the aquaculture sector, I know that there were some difficulties in the funding. From 1 April, that sector was going to be under pressure anyway. Is there more of a breakdown of what support there is for that sector? I know that some interim measures were being considered. Are those interim measures in place? Has a new funding stream been set up for that sector yet, because it is caught in this situation as well?

Mr Poots: Aquaculture is relatively small, so we probably can meet that funding from within our own resource without looking elsewhere. However, the Department is, and has been, working on that particular issue to see how it can help aquaculture, but we have not been given a paper yet as to how we might proceed on that.

Mr Nesbitt: I echo the sentiments on the loss of the Minister's father.

I was going to ask about the implications for seasonal workers, such as fruit pickers, but you have covered that issue. So, if you will allow me perhaps to move on from the statement a little bit, my question about farm incomes remains in your area of concern. The Executive Office Committee got a briefing yesterday from lead officials on

the EU exit, who said that the policy was that there should be no loss of spending power through Brexit. Is that your Department's policy and do you think that it is ambitious enough, or should we actually be looking to become better off?

Mr Poots: Obviously, we want to be better off than we are now, particularly given that a lot of people in the farming community have seen their profits basically flatline. They need to be better off, going forward. The UK is a net importer of foods. We have seen a circumstance where, in the current situation, that food supply has kept going and it has been a bit more challenging to get food exported, and that could give us an indication of what could happen post-Brexit. However, it depends on whether there is no deal or a deal. If there is no deal, tariffs will be applied both ways, and that will mean that much more food that is produced locally will be used locally. Whilst we encourage a deal and want there to be a deal because it is probably in the interests of wider industry, it might not be in the interests of agriculture because most of our products can be sold and used within the UK, albeit that we sell a lot of dairy products to Europe, Africa and the Far East. We sell a lot of lamb to Europe, but we also import vast quantities of cheeses, wine, which we obviously do not produce here, pork products and, for that matter, beef products from Europe. It will be complicated when we leave Europe. There is no doubt about that, but I believe that we can overcome those complications, because we have the spirit and the will to do it, and our response to the coronavirus demonstrates that we do.

Mr Nesbitt: I hope that the Minister will allow me to stretch even further from the statement. Yesterday, we were talking about the shared prosperity fund, and the officials from the Executive Office could tell us only that it is being led by the Department of Finance. Have the Minister and his Department been engaged by Finance about this fund, and what is its potential?

Dr McMahon: One of the challenges has been getting information on the fund, and, right the way through, the officials have been trying to get more information. Prior to the resumption of the Assembly, proposals were put in for us to get at least the same level of funding as we did before. At this stage, however, we are waiting on the outcome of that.

Mr Poots: I might add [*Inaudible*] we have a paper that indicates that we could do more with state aid post-Brexit than we currently have the capacity to do. That is a good thing in that, whilst we might not be able to reach the ceiling, at least it is not something that will hold us down.

Mr Frew: I will take the risk of not preparing a supplementary question, because I am sure that the Minister will respond sufficiently to my first question. Given the debates that we have had in the House and across the globe about climate change, and given that we are in the unique position where a lot of business and industry have stopped but farming has continued, will the Minister outline what scientific evidence his Department is looking at to ensure that the farming industry moving forward will be able to help in the fight around pollution and climate change?

Mr Poots: I could give a very long answer to that, but do not worry, Mr Deputy Chairperson, I heard what you said earlier. The population has not decreased, nor,

indeed, has agriculture changed over the last six or eight weeks, but we have seen an improvement in the climate and a reduction in greenhouse gases, and all that has happened in this scenario. That gives me evidence, which I have always sought to promote since the last time that I was environment Minister, that much of what happens in agriculture is circular and that there is a lot of capture of carbon. People choose to ignore that and want to concentrate only on the output. Beyond this, we need Governments right across the world to look at how various agricultural practices best promote that circular environment where the greenhouse gases are reduced because there is a capture and to not just look at the emissions. If you look at the one without looking at the other, you are not getting a proper analysis of it, and given the circumstances that we now live in, it has been demonstrated very clearly that, when it comes to the environment, agriculture is not the problem that, in the past, some people have suggested that it is.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I call Ms Martina Anderson, I remind members to please ask questions that are directly related to the Minister's statement. Mr Frew, I will only slap you on the wrist because you did not ask a supplementary question, so thank you.

Ms Anderson: I too extend my deepest sympathy to the Minister and his family on the death of his father. It is a horrendous time to lose a parent.

You recently confirmed, as you said in your statement, the collective arrangements that have been put in place for the rural community transport partnerships. Will you give us some details of how that collective arrangement between you and the Infrastructure Minister is working?

Mr Poots: I was delighted that our two teams could get together on that issue. The rural community transportation partnerships have, for years, been collecting people who have had trouble travelling from rural areas into towns and brought people to the doctor and the shops and enabled them to have that part of their life continue. However, as a consequence of COVID-19, those services were not needed — well the doctors are still needed, but to go to the shops and to go to town. People need to be flexible, and we have been flexible and have identified that the need still exists. They needed those goods before and they needed transport to go and get those goods. Therefore, instead of them having to go to the town, we bring the town to them. That is basically it: the services are taking the goods to the homes of those people who need it.

I am delighted to be able to work with the Department for Infrastructure in doing that and I think that it is a significant demonstration of how the Executive works together. There are people who want to focus on a few arguments that we have — and those arguments are very often a microcosm of what is taking place in public — but there are an awful lot of good working practices and this is one of them.

Ms Anderson: Thank you Minister for that answer. I concur with what you said about the importance of that connectivity and the collective nature of the Executive. You mentioned rural needs and a statement coming out. I wonder if you will elaborate on any collective arrangement, perhaps between yourself and the Health Minister, on the issue of mental health, which you touched on in your statement. The rural community does not have mental

health services like those in urban areas. For instance, I think of the dedicated services that we have in Derry, such as HURT or Inspire. There are very few dedicated rural mental health services, so is that something that you are going to take forward?

Mr Poots: There are two issues that we are aware of that have risen significantly as a result of COVID-19. One is people's mental health and the other is domestic violence. I believe that it is incumbent upon the Executive to seek to support communities in both of those areas, and they are very often connected.

Mental health is a big issue. It is a big issue in rural communities and it has been an issue that has led to the ultimate in terms of people taking their lives. The ability to do that in rural communities has always been greater because of the availability of the means to do it. We do have organisations within Health or within the rural affairs side of my Department. Health has also provided significant support to organisations that are freely available to everybody in the community, but I suspect that we are probably not doing enough. If we can identify an area and how best to meet a need, then we will need respond to that. I am happy to work with colleagues in the Committee to do that.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, please accept my sincere sympathies on the passing of your father.

In your statement you said that on 7 April your Department was starting to develop proposals for rebuilding the economy. I represent an urban constituency that has been hit very hard, for example by the closure of our hotels and restaurants. How are you going to work with the Department for the Economy for the post-pandemic period and about how we can start recreating the co-dependence between the agri-food industry and our hospitality sector?

Mr Poots: Thank you for that. The Executive have started to do a course of work on recovery, so that is across all Departments. Economic recovery is very important. It is not just about the economy, though: the health service needs to recover. Waiting lists were horrendous before this happened. Those waiting lists will be even worse. People are not getting the screening that they should have had. Dentists are not practising at present. They regularly catch out oral cancer, and so forth. We will go back to major problems in health, education and the economy.

The economy that we left is not the one to which we will return. With the best will in the world, we will not get the same numbers of tourists for a number of years that we would have been getting in one year, like last year. We need to be on top of those issues. How do we actually change the economy? How do we look at where the benefits are? For example, many thousands of people who worked in large cities in Great Britain have returned home, and continue to work. Do they need to return to the big cities, or can we keep them here? Those people would help to drive the economy upwards. They would need to buy houses and would bring in money from their jobs, which are based elsewhere. If they lived here, they would go to restaurants here and use all the services that exist here.

As an Executive, we need to look at all the opportunities that exist and work collectively to harness those opportunities, create as many jobs here as possible, seek to replace jobs that have been lost through nobody's fault

but that of COVID-19, and restore the economy. It will be a major challenge. It will not be easy. It is a course of work that we must do, however, because, if we do not do it and do it well, many people will face hardship as a consequence.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Ms Bradshaw is right: she actually represents the finest constituency in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron: I commend the Minister for his very swift return to work — I am not sure that he actually ever left it — after the death of his dad. Our thoughts are, of course, with him at this time.

Minister, I was going to ask you about fly-tipping. I am heartened by the announcement of the phased reopening of recycling centres in south Antrim. It has been very much welcomed in the area.

I will move on to another topic in your statement. You touched upon the 24-hour pollution response service to protect waterbodies. I have been doing a little bit of scientific work of my own, which has involved one very energetic Labrador-Kelpie cross who loves to swim. Because I live in Antrim, he swims regularly in the Sixmilewater and also at the Antrim lough shore and Rea's Wood area. He has been a mad keen swimmer since he was a very small pup, going on four years. What I am trying to get to is that the water actually regularly made him sick. He had numerous visits to the vet, and whatnot, before we discovered the common denominator: what was making him sick was the water and, quite obviously, pollution. He has been swimming very happily for weeks with no ill effects. Minister, is there an opportunity here? Can we take some encouragement from that? Going forward, as industry returns to normal, how do we manage that and stop the pollution of our waters?

Mr Poots: The Sixmilewater is a tricky one because there has been pollution there quite a number of times and we have never identified the source of it. That has not been for the want of trying. We are pretty sure that it is from an industrial source. The anecdotal evidence that you have found yourself would seem to endorse that because, obviously, agriculture has continued and it has not been the cause of the problem there.

We need to continue to work to tackle water pollution. I remember reading that the River Lagan, for example, was full of salmon and trout many, many years ago before the Industrial Revolution. Whilst the Industrial Revolution was fantastic because it created hundreds of thousands of jobs, and we were really at the cutting edge at the turn of the 19th century. Nonetheless, there was an environmental impact. Whilst we seek to develop this recovery plan, we need to always ensure that the environment is front and centre so that we can create a better environment.

One of the things that COVID-19 has taught us is that we do not need to fly as much or drive as much. A lot of people have found that working from home is very good: it is good for their mental health and their family life. My wife has found that, maybe, there is too much of me at home [Laughter] but nonetheless, most other people are probably happy enough. Seriously, going to these Zoom meetings is absolutely fantastic and there is no reason going forward that that cannot be continued. Once this is over, we do not need to drop what has been good practice, and that is what I referred to in my statement. We need to

identify what has been good, hold on to it and use it in the future. It is fairly evident that the fewer planes flying and the fewer cars driving will be good for the environment.

Mrs Cameron: Thank you for those comments, Minister. I agree that life has changed and that we should take the positive from that and continue that change. I also want to commend your Department for its help in dealing with the crisis and, in particular, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) for their work in making PPE. That is very welcome.

Mr McGuigan: I pass on my condolences to the Minister and his family on the loss of his father.

Following on from the previous question, a global pandemic costing many people their lives, livelihoods and businesses should not be seen as a way of bringing about change in our environment. However, as the Minister and others have pointed out, that has been a result. It is no secret that, worldwide, greenhouse gases have dropped significantly over the last number of weeks. There is less air pollution and there have been many more positive environmental changes. The previous question about water quality is just one. It has also been pointed out that there have been some negatives around fly-tipping and burning of woodland and shrubbery etc. Minister, is your Department continuing to carry out testing in the North of the environmental impact of lockdown? Can you give us a sense of what that is?

Mr Poots: Our water quality unit continues to carry out tests and continues to engage in the work that it needs to do. Reports of pollution will be followed up. Some checks that took place, for example on-farm checks, have had to be stopped. However, we will respond where there is any pollution. Water is still being tested to ensure that it is fit for human consumption, so there is still a series of work: work has not closed down, I can assure you.

Mr McGuigan: The Minister alluded to rebalancing and reorganising the economy and reprioritising how we do business. I noted comments yesterday, from his Executive colleague in the Department of Infrastructure, about protecting the environment or protecting some of the positives that have come out of this. In his statement, he mentioned that he intends to take that forward. As Minister responsible for the environment, how soon will that happen and will you be working with your Executive colleagues to bring changes to the House? We can all identify that a good habit is good, but if we allow ourselves to drift back to bad habits that have negative impacts, that will be hard to undo. 5.15 pm

Mr Poots: The Executive have set it out that they want to develop a recovery plan. For me, the environment is front and centre of that recovery plan. Any recovery plan that ignores the environment is doomed to fail.

Mr O'Toole: First, I join others in offering my condolences to the Minister and to thank him for his dedication to his role while he has been going through the grieving process. Whatever people's party affiliation may be, it is important that we note that commitment at a time like this.

I also welcome his commitment to a changed economy in the future. We have all acknowledged that we cannot go back to how things were. Like others in the House, I hope that the barbers reopen, because I cannot go on much longer without a haircut.

My question is on a subject on which we probably have not agreed in the past but on which, I hope, we can have some agreement, at least in the short term: the difficult subject of Brexit. In answer to an earlier question, the Minister talked about European continental markets for our farmers and for our fisheries. Would the Minister agree that it will be difficult in the months ahead for the UK and the EU to conclude a comprehensive trade deal that will secure continued access to those markets? Would he agree that it would be good if the Executive could come together to ask for an extension?

Before the Minister answers, let me say that I completely respect his support for Brexit, and my question is without prejudice to the final relationship between the UK and the EU. You do not have to agree on Brexit. You do not even have to agree on the implementation of the Ireland protocol but simply agree that neither our farmers nor our fishermen can live with us coming out of the transition period at the end of this year in chaos. We need an extension, even if it is just in the short term.

Mr Poots: I recall that, when I was at school, there were two kinds of people. There were people who were extremely organised and had everything set out and completed and handed in their school project a week in advance. Then there were those who could never get their work done on time, no matter how much time they had. I tended to fall into the latter category. The longer you keep delaying and delaying and putting things back, the more opportunity you give people not to focus. It is not a decision that the Executive will take; the decision on timings will be taken at Westminster. At this point — I have been at a number of meetings at which the issue has been raised — all the indications are that Westminster is sticking to the current date. That is where we are. It is above my pay grade to change the date, even if I desired to.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I call the Member for a supplementary question, I remind him that the Minister's statement relates to COVID-19. The question was quite long and not directly related to the Minister's statement.

Mr O'Toole: My follow-up relates specifically to COVID-19, and it may be one that the official may want to come in on. We may not agree in the short term on a Brexit extension, although I hope that fisheries and farmers will be able to make their voice heard in the months ahead. Can I ask the Minister or the official to indicate how many Department staff who had been working on Brexit and its implementation or on the implementation of the Ireland protocol have been reassigned in whole or in part to work on COVID-19? Do you have both the overall number and the number as a proportion of the DAERA workforce?

Dr McMahon: I do not have a specific breakdown. Part of the reason is that, in the early days — this has changed in the course of the pandemic — just about everybody who was able to was working purely on the pandemic for a time. Having said that, we have kept a core team working on the policy issues as they have arisen. We have had to, because Westminster has so many resources that we have had to be able to respond as best we can during the pandemic. That has varied over time, but I can find the current picture and respond to you in writing, if that is helpful.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his answers so far. I join other Members in offering the Minister my sincere condolences on the loss of his father, Charlie.

The Minister referred to waste-recycling centres, and I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned about the build-up of rubbish after spring cleaning and are really annoyed by the rise in the revolting practice of fly-tipping. Does the Minister deem recycling to be an essential service from an environmental perspective and from a public health perspective? Furthermore, does he consider travelling to a recycling centre as an essential journey?

Mr Poots: Waste material tends to attract things that you do not want, such as rats, mice and other vermin, so waste material lying in the back garden is not a good thing. It attracts the wrong things. The opportunity for people to dispose of it is, therefore, necessary. I note that, prior to opening recycling centres, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council will put bin lorries in places where people can bring their bags and leave them — on the Ulster Grand Prix circuit, for example. There is plenty of space there. People will leave their bags off and the bin lorries will take them away. We need to look at the opportunities for getting rid of that material.

There are also issues due to the fact that a lot of recyclables are moved on into industry. We have facilities that use that material to generate electricity, and that is becoming an issue not just here but across the United Kingdom. We need to ensure that there is a flow of material where people have made a large investment in ensuring that we have a circular industry and that we generate electricity from a source that was previously a waste source and use that material as fuel. Recycling is necessary, and the recycling targets that we have set have been set for good reason. We are falling back from those at this time. We, therefore, need to get focused and get back to delivering on that and ensuring that we can do it. Yes, our recycling and our recycling centres are extremely important to local communities.

Mr McNulty: Minister, I applaud your decision to reopen the marts. If you were watching the BBC news last night, you will have seen my neighbours Oliver and Fiona McCann arriving at Markethill's reopened mart. They were selling their stock, and they were relieved to be able to get further income at this time of need. They also applauded the operation of Markethill mart. There was a different system, in that sellers could not be with their stock, but they thought that they were treated fairly and appropriately.

Minister, I was excited to hear you talk about reimagining the future. Farmers and people who work in the agri-food sector are, by their nature, hard-working, industrious, innovative and resourceful. Their passion and expertise should be welcomed and embraced. How might the future look? How will it provide comfort and security for people who are now uncertain and fearful about the future?

Mr Poots: One thing about the farming community, more than most, is their resilience. Resilience is incredibly important — it is important to everyone — and the lack of resilience is one of the problems in respect of mental health. Over the years, we have seen the sons and daughters of farmers who did not have enough money in the farm to keep the young people at home go out and learn a trade. Many of those young people went on to establish businesses. You will find that a lot of businesses

such as quarry crushing, the manufacturing of engineering products, wood factories, carpentry factories and so forth have been established by farmers' sons who did not have the opportunity at home but had the resilience and the get-up-and-go to make something happen. It is important that we in Northern Ireland, as a community, have the get-up-and-go, when this is over, to make a difference and to make this a better place than it was before. We have referred to the local shops and the need to support them.

This community has pulled together in a remarkable way, having been a divided community for so many years. I would love to see it pulling together even more in a way that would have been unimaginable years ago, where we do not get caught up with where someone goes or does not go on a Sunday, what sport they support or anything else but work together to make things happen for our neighbours, whoever they happen to be.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Folks, the Minister has been on his feet since 4.22 pm, and it is now 5.25 pm. That just demonstrates that there has been a bit of backsliding in keeping it short and pointed. I still have three members on my list, and it is my intention that those three members will get called and will get asking their questions, but it demonstrates that we need to keep it focused in these sessions.

Ms Bailey: I, too, express my condolences on the very sad death of your father, Minister. It is a hard thing to experience in good times, and I cannot imagine what it is like in the current situation.

Having read the end of your statement, I am convinced that you want to join the Green Party with your green thinking. I was really pleased to hear it, because the language in it is really good. Can we take that as a green light that, when we talk about reimagining the economy post-COVID, we will have tackling the climate crisis at the heart of that? Are we talking about installing and implementing a green new deal and a just transition?

Mr Poots: There are so many things that we can do to help the climate and have done and will continue to do. Northern Ireland is probably way ahead of the game but has not been properly recognised. We are ahead of the game on renewable energy. We are up there with recycling; we have exceeded our targets. With regard to how we produce our food, I have always maintained that, as a grass-based agricultural system, we are much more environmentally friendly than many of the practices, particularly across central Europe, where animals are kept indoors in feedlots. We do a lot, but we can do more and will continue to do more.

I do not care much for grand names for things; I care for outcomes. It has been demonstrated over the course of COVID that a lot of things that we have been doing have been delivering outcomes. It has been demonstrated to us that there is an advantage to Northern Ireland in our environmental practice if we fly less, drive less and, in energy production, ensure that we maximise what we get from green resources. In doing that, we can have more people living here; we can have a stronger economy because more people are living here; and we can provide fantastic services through new digital means without people having to travel as much as they did.

Ms Bailey: In your statement, you referred to substantial schemes that had been put in place for the fishery sector

and the farming sector, but we know that the horticulture sector, for example, is on the brink of collapse. Why is there a disparity in the Department's response? To date, what plans have been made to help the horticulture sector?

Mr Poots: The biggest thing that we can do to help the horticulture sector is to allow it to sell its goods and allow people to go to its facilities to buy its goods. If we can socially distance in a supermarket or, indeed, in a facility that sells alcohol, which I do not have an issue about people doing, surely we can do it in a large facility like a horticulture centre, where there will probably never be more than 20 or 30 people at one time. It is ridiculous, and we look stupid having people queuing outside the local wine store when we do not allow people to buy a few plants, go out into their garden and get involved in exercise. It is good for their mental health. The biggest thing that we can do to support that industry is to allow that industry to reopen. I hope and I plead with the Executive to do that. I do not want to go to the Executive. I have already raised the issue that we need to financially support them. They will need some financial support either way. However, we are either going to have a very small bill or a very large bill if we want to sustain that horticultural sector, going forward. We can achieve a very small bill without impacting on the number of people who contract COVID-19. I would not want to do it if I thought that it would lead to an increase in COVID-19. I do not believe that it will. I appeal to everybody in this Chamber to support me in doing the right thing.

Mr Allister: I join in the condolences to the Minister on the loss of his father. Charlie Poots was a good man.

I also support the Minister on what he has just said in the context of that, and his public call for the sensible reopening of garden centres and, indeed, for the facility of drive-in church services. All those are common sense, rational, safe proposals. In that context, he decided, quite properly, to open our forest parks. However, I do want to press him on why, in association with that, he has kept the car parks closed? Take the Stormont estate; it is not a forest park, but it is a place where people come for exercise. We all see that every day. Yet, as we drive out the gates tonight, we will see that there are cones at the car parking spaces, but the cars are just down the street parked in front of people's houses. Where is the logic? Where is the sense of that? If we are going to open the forest parks, do we not also need to facilitate people to get to them, particularly as they are an asset for many urban dwellers as well as those who live close by? Will the Minister, please, re-look at the issue of car parks and the forest parks?

Mr Poots: I am happy to do that. This is fluid. Everything is moving, and I am happy to do what the member requests. However, the week before close-down, it was a particularly sunny weekend, and masses of people descended on Tollymore Park, Castlewellan Park, Murlough Bay and the north coast. All those facilities were overloaded with people. Therefore, it was important — certainly at the outset — that people got the message that, "If you continue to do this, folks, you are going to cost lives, and you are going to cost a large number of lives". Now, we got the message out there. I believe that the public have embraced the message, and we need to show a little respect to the public for their ability to behave responsibly,

because most people are on that page. Therefore, as an initial step, opening forest parks for pedestrians, so that they will be largely used by people from local communities, while discouraging people from driving distances to go to those facilities, is the right thing to do.

I get it that some people will park down the street and then walk round to it. It is largely to discourage large numbers of people from descending on those facilities, but we will look at how we can address that issue and how we can perhaps have people present to ensure that only so many cars can enter the car parks at facilities such as Tollymore, which are hugely popular because they are such beautiful places.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give us an update on farm inspections? He indicated in an answer to me that the issue would be reviewed by today. What is the current position on farm inspections?

Mr Poots: Farm inspections were stopped until 30 April. Obviously, COVID-19 has not gone away. We believe, and certainly the evidence from the Chief Medical Officer shows, that there are fewer hospital admissions and a lower number of people are going into intensive care, which, ultimately, will lead to a lower number of people dying. Hopefully, we will see the downward trajectory on these figures. I believe that now is not the appropriate time to resume that activity, but it is something that we will consider later in May.

Mr Carroll: I want to join with others and give my condolences to the Minister on the passing of his father.

The Minister indicated that there could be 10,000 job losses in the agri-food sector. The UN has warned of the possibility of "biblical" famines. I raised with him before the need for greater state involvement, particularly, his Department, in food planning and production. Has any further work been undertaken on that?

Mr Poots: Generally, whatever the state puts its hand to tends to make things worse. I remember very well when I was at school studying how, when collective farms were brought in in Russia, its grain harvests were absolutely appalling. People tend to be much more productive when they are doing it for themselves rather than for the state.

Northern Ireland can make a contribution to ensuring that people across the world are fed. The great continent of Africa is buying large quantities of dried milk from Northern Ireland. That is good quality, safe, nutritious food coming from this place. Lots of food from Northern Ireland ends up in the Far East and other parts of the world. We can continue to drive up productivity by encouraging people to have that independent streak, and, believe me, we are very independent-minded people in Northern Ireland. The best way forward is to encourage that independence to continue.

Mr Carroll: The state has an important role, obviously, in health, as people can now see with the NHS workers. It has an important role in food production and planning, especially as shortages are a possibility. The Minister will be aware of people being forced to skip meals, and food insecurity is on the rise as a result of COVID-19. Wrongly, in my view, food shortages have been ascribed to panic buying. They are actually down to a market-driven approach to food production. In his statement, the Minister said that "we must re-imagine the future", which is something that I absolutely agree with. Does he believe

that we need to re-imagine how food is produced and received in our society?

Mr Poots: In our food production methods, we need always to be reviewing, advancing and ensuring that we do things better. I am happy with that, and the people who produce food are happy with it. Food production methods have been evolving and changing, and we can continue to ensure that that happens.

We can have greater intervention in the distribution of wealth in the agri-food sector. Retailers are too powerful, and farmers and producers are too divided and weak to challenge them. That is where Government need to provide some support. I totally agree with fair trade policy, which ensures that a coffee farmer in West Africa gets something that is of value to him and allows him to grow his farm and feed his family. The same should be applied here. Where people are productive and working hard, they should get some return for it. The profits should not end up at one end of the process. The Competition and Markets Authority has not provided the support that it should to primary producers.

I thank everybody who expressed their commiserations on my father's death, and I want to say a really big "Thank you" to the staff in the Ulster Hospital for all that they have done.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Thank you Minister. The Minister started at 4.22 pm. It is now 5.40 pm. He went over the allotted time, but I am grateful that he stayed and answered all the questions.

Agenda item 4 is the time, date and place of our next Committee meeting. We have received confirmation from the Justice Minister and the Minister for the Economy that each wishes to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at a meeting next Thursday. Unless otherwise notified about an earlier meeting, that is when the next meeting of the Committee will take place. Written notification to confirm that will be issued in due course to members in the usual way.

As we exit the Chamber, I remind everyone of the regulations on social distancing. That concludes the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. Stay safe. God bless.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

30 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Health

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Ms Joanne Bunting
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Pat Catney
Mr Alan Chambers
Mr Alex Easton
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Robin Swann

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members are welcome to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response.

Agenda item 1 is the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on 16 April. Members are asked to note the minutes, which I have agreed. Members should also note that the minutes of evidence from that meeting have been published in the Official Report, which is available on the Committee's web page.

Members, before we begin today, this is the fifth meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. Since the last meeting, Mr Beggs and I have had a discussion with the Speaker, and I know that some concerns were also reflected by Whips at the Business Committee, about making the most of this body.

In the procedures determined by the Speaker, and over the last few meetings, it has been made clear that there is more flexibility at this Committee than at a plenary session, and we are keen to use that flexibility. However, the challenge from the Chair is that we are trying to deal today with two statements and ensure that every member

is called; that is more difficult than in normal Committees because we have over 20 members participating.

Therefore, I say politely to members at the outset that this Committee was created as an additional and specific scrutiny mechanism of the Executive's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly important when Question Time is suspended. I am giving notice to members, before they listen to the Minister's statement, that what we need today are questions. Members will have other opportunities to make speeches. Members who ask short, sharp, focused questions will be offered the opportunity to ask a supplementary question. Members who engage in lengthy preambles may find they will not be called to ask a supplementary question. I am asking for cooperation from members, today, and I will of course expect the Minister to give succinct answers as well.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from Mr Robin Swann, the Minister of Health. The Speaker received notification on 27 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in your pack at page 8.

I welcome the Minister of Health to this meeting of the Committee, and I invite him to make his statement, which should be heard by members without interruption.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you, Deputy Chair. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for accepting my request to address you again — this will be the second time that I have addressed the Committee in the five sittings that it has had.

This virus is revealing many absolute heroes — none more so than our healthcare workers and their families. On this day, I think that it is important that this Assembly also places on record its acknowledgement of, and best wishes to, Captain Tom Moore — now Honorary Colonel Tom Moore — on this his 100th Birthday. His fundraising efforts have inspired a nation, yet only when this virus passes — and it will pass — will the sheer impact of his morale-boosting efforts be fully realised.

In coming here today I am keen to continue the open and transparent approach that my Department and the wider health and social care sector is taking in response to the COVID-19 emergency, and I welcome this opportunity to further update you today.

We had our first death in Northern Ireland due to COVID-19 on 19 March — six weeks, or 42 days, ago. Since then, we have seen 3,536 confirmed cases of the disease, and sadly today I announce a further nine deaths. That brings the total to 347 souls that have been lost. That is 347 families that have lost loved ones and 347 people who have left behind devastated family, friends and neighbours.

To be clear, that figure is not just hospital-related deaths. It includes a number of those that, sadly, have passed away at home, in residential and nursing homes and in hospices. I said during the week that the death toll is already on a scale not seen during the worst of the Troubles. That was not rhetoric. I hope that that comparison brings the scale of the situation home to everyone once again. I hope that those who are flouting the restrictions or clamouring for them to be lifted will consider those figures and will be jolted back to reality. We all need to keep doing the right thing on social distancing, and the vast majority of people are continuing to do that. However, there is a risk that the important work that has been done to save lives could lead to complacency in some quarters.

The spread of the virus so far across the community has not been as serious as we first feared, but that does not mean that the warnings were misplaced. It means that the warnings were taken seriously and that people stayed at home and kept their distance. As the chief scientific adviser warned earlier this month, Northern Ireland remains on a knife-edge.

I will now take some time to explain the latest developments in the approach that I have adopted to deal with the emergency and to outline some of the significant actions that have been key to my response.

Testing has always been a critical part of our pandemic response. It has been deployed for different purposes as the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved. It is a vital part of our weaponry and will continue to be so. I want to reassure members that testing is growing and will continue to do so as rapidly as is possible. We are working with a number of key stakeholders and delivery partners across the health and social care (HSC) system, local universities and industry to further expand testing capacity across Northern Ireland. Our approach includes targeted testing of patients in particular health and care settings, testing in the community for surveillance purposes and testing of key workers to allow our essential services to keep running.

At the start of the outbreak, HSC laboratory services had a capacity of around 40 tests a day. The latest number of tests carried out that will be officially reported later today are 1,419 in our local labs and a further 824 as part of the national testing programme at the three local testing sites. That means that, yesterday, we carried out or completed a total of 2,243 tests — our highest daily number to date. Again, I pay tribute to all the staff who are working across our testing sites and laboratories. However, while the increase in testing is a positive development, I still want to increase our capacity further. A consortium involving our universities, local businesses and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) has been established, the purpose of which is to support and further scale up the expansion of diagnostic testing for COVID-19.

To date, 22,328 individuals have been tested by our local labs. That figure includes over 7,000 healthcare workers.

It has been a key priority of mine to ensure that any staff members who were sick or were staying at home due to a symptomatic family member were tested quickly. In recent days, I have also announced the expansion of testing initiatives, including surveillance testing in general practices and hospitals as well as significantly increased testing in care homes.

Those initiatives are important, so I want to use this opportunity to explain in detail, as I did when I updated Executive colleagues yesterday, the recent developments in testing. Those include a programme of testing and surveillance in general practices, which started at the end of last week. That programme will involve testing of and data collection from a sample of patients with respiratory symptoms who have presented to their GP.

Those will be patients whose symptoms do not require referral to hospital or to a primary-care COVID-19 centre. The surveillance testing programme will be based on general practices that are already involved in the influenza GP spotter surveillance system. A rolling programme of testing and surveillance in emergency departments (EDs) will start this week. That will include testing a sample of patients who attend an ED with mild to moderate respiratory symptoms and who, following clinical assessment, are deemed not to require admission to hospital.

There will also be testing of patients who are admitted to hospital for emergency or elective care. All residents and staff in any care home which is identified as having a potential outbreak or cluster of infection will be tested. All patients who are being discharged from acute hospital care to a care home will be tested. Testing will be available to all patients and/or residents who are being transferred into a care home from any setting, whether that be from hospital, supported living or directly from their own home. The UK-wide staff testing programme has now been extended to cover key workers in other sectors as well as those in health and social care. This testing is available at three drive-through locations in Northern Ireland: the SSE Arena car park; City of Derry rugby club; and Craigavon MOT centre. Trusts also continue to provide testing for health and social care staff as part of their in-house testing provision.

I have been clear about the challenges with personal protective equipment (PPE). My aim is to ensure that we have a sufficient stock of PPE to allow our HSC staff to perform their roles as safely as possible. That is why I am committed to ensuring that we rigorously pursue every viable supply source, both locally and elsewhere.

As I advised previously, the four nations PPE plan was published on 10 April, and we are working closely with England, Scotland and Wales on all aspects of that plan. We have already supported each other by way of mutual aid and that will continue in the weeks and months ahead. We continue to explore new supply lines with the Republic of Ireland. We have also significantly increased supplies from local agents, and local industry is to be commended as it continues to show itself to be adaptable, innovative and responsive to the changing environment.

China is the most significant source of worldwide supplies. The work led by my Department and the Department of Finance to secure PPE is now at a very advanced and critical stage. We continue to work to ensure that all

possible steps are taken to open up a supply chain that meets our needs and supports our four nations approach. Additionally, clear specifications and photographs will be requested to ensure that stock is compliant with our requirements.

Our nursing and residential care homes are at the forefront of the battle against COVID-19. I pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of staff working across the care sector at this very challenging time. It is vital that we continue to support care homes and their staff to keep themselves and the vulnerable people whom they care for safe and well. Ensuring that care homes have sufficient supplies of PPE is an absolute priority, and trusts will work with care homes in their area to ensure that each home has a buffer of stock.

I have also taken steps to ensure that homes can continue to operate at this difficult time. Health and social care trusts will continue to work in partnership with care home providers to help to deal with staff shortages. Where people have responded to our workforce appeal, those with the right skills will be prioritised for deployment with independent care home providers. Trust staff have already been redeployed to care homes and will continue to be.

On Monday of this week, I announced an additional £6.5 million for Northern Ireland's care homes, as part of a series of measures to support the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. That additional funding will help to ensure that homes can increase the level of cleaning undertaken and bring in any additional staff whom they need to help support the isolation of residents when that is necessary. Under the support package, homes will receive a payment of £10,000, £15,000 or £20,000, depending on their size.

As we progress through the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to ensure that the public health response adapts to the evolving situation to ensure that it continues to be as effective as possible. Contact tracing of those who have been in contact with people who have COVID-19 is a key public health measure and will assist in tracking any future outbreaks of the virus, informing actions that are required to further suppress it.

The aim of the contact tracing programme is to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to save lives by rapidly identifying and closing down chains of transmission to reduce population spread and protect those most vulnerable. The benefits to be realised include flattening the peak and reducing the impact on health service delivery capacity. It will also support wider social and economic recovery.

During April, the Public Health Agency has been working intensively on putting systems in place to recommence contact tracing for COVID-19. That has included the development of contact definitions, contact management algorithms, scripts, databases, training materials, facilities and software for Northern Ireland. Approximately 50 staff were identified for the initial roll-out of contact tracing, which commenced on 27 April. This week, training will be delivered, and the process and systems will be tested and refined. The contact tracing team is expected to expand to around 300 by week four. A number of agencies are being actively engaged to provide suitable staff to deliver contact tracing. Those include the universities, medical and nursing students, councils and environmental health officers. The manual contact tracing process being piloted is using a new IT system not previously seen

in Northern Ireland. This system supports capture and analysis of contact tracing information and is the same system used by the contact tracing teams in the Republic of Ireland. Logically, this will facilitate easier sharing of information about outbreaks in the border regions. However, there is still work to be done on what information will be systematically shared and under what legal and information governance framework.

In addition, there is a new mobile smartphone app being built that will allow members of the public to use their mobile phones to recognise proximity to other app users and inform each other anonymously when one of the users is confirmed as infected through a positive test result. This is being built as a UK-wide service; anyone in any of the four nations could potentially download and use the app.

The modelling group meets regularly to review modelling assumptions in light of the latest emerging data. This is important as the modelling work is particularly sensitive to assumptions based on emerging data, and thus is expected to change over time. The modelling group last met on 21 April 2020 and agreed that no change should be made to the current modelling. We now need to see if the number of infections will start to come down, thereby indicating that Northern Ireland is beyond the peak. We will know this over the course of the next week or two.

My Department has been working closely with colleagues in HSC trusts, the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency to put in place a range of measures in order to protect the health of the people of Northern Ireland in the context of the COVID-19 emergency. The response to COVID-19 and its impact is a rapidly changing picture. My Department and the entire health and social care system are acutely aware of the issues emerging and are working to ensure that every conceivable effort is being made to help people keep safe and protect staff. I have been clear that funding pressures will not be an obstacle in taking forward what needs to be done.

It is generally expected that the Department will have significant additional funding requirements as we move through this pandemic and as this rapidly evolving and fluid situation unfolds. Expenditure forecasts and associated funding requirements are uncertain, given the fluidity of the position and the need to base projections on high-level assumptions, including time frames. It is likely that the volatility of estimates will continue in this context for at least the next three months.

With regard to reviewing regulations, exit planning and next steps, I very much wish that I could provide some certainty on what the future holds for us all. While there are grounds for hope that the outbreak can be brought under control through maintenance of the current restrictions, coupled with continuation of the high level of compliance that has been observed by people in Northern Ireland, the outbreak has not yet reached the point where the restrictions can be relaxed.

There will no major or sudden shifts back to how things used to be. It must be stressed that any future decisions on social-distancing regulations will be taken carefully and incrementally. The progress achieved through good adherence to the restrictions by the people of Northern Ireland will be lost very quickly if there is any adverse change in compliance with the existing social-distancing

measures or relaxation of the restrictions that help achieve that compliance.

The time will come for a discussion on what comes next, and we have to face that together, honestly and openly. There will not be any easy decisions, because we recognise that simply maintaining the current lockdown indefinitely could have serious repercussions for many people's mental and physical well-being. We will all have to weigh up our options very carefully, working closely with colleagues across these islands, to ensure that we take the right decisions at the right time. The crisis has brought home to all of us some really important realities. It has underlined, more than anything that I can remember, just how essential the health service is to this society. Recent weeks have shown the importance of having sufficient capacity built into the health service, both to ensure the quality of day-to-day service provision and to prepare for the pandemics and other shocks that cannot readily be predicted. That includes being more self-sufficient in vital supplies of PPE and other goods in future. Relying on the global market, with its just-in-time supply chains, has risks attached in times such as these. At this point, I thank the local companies that have stepped up to the plate and started supplying protective equipment to health workers. They are local heroes too.

Despite the current challenges, our health service is looking after us all and keeping us safe, so we need to look after it better. By that, I refer in particular to the past 10 years of financial squeeze. We cannot keep running a health and social care system on empty, with it barely getting by and living from hand to mouth on single-year budgets, and failing to make the necessary transformational changes to ensure that we properly meet the needs of the population. Let us resolve to do better for the health service, which has stood so firmly by us. Let us fund it properly in the long term and transform it for the better. Let that be one of the lasting legacies of the period that we are living through. Let that be the true and lasting tribute to those whom we applaud every Thursday night.

Nowhere is that commitment more necessary than in social care. We see that so starkly as our care homes struggle with the COVID-19 onslaught. The importance of social care is clearer today than it ever has been, but so too are the financial challenges that have been building for years in the sector. We have to make sure that it is in a much better place in the future. That means taking a long, hard look at the current model of care in order to ensure that it better meets the needs of the population that it serves. One key aspect will be to seek to move from a transaction-based approach to funding to an outcome-based approach. I acknowledge the heroic work being done by many private-sector care providers at this time. I put that on record and say, "Thank you". It has been very clear in the crisis, however, that the independent sector has needed the state to step in to support it, not least with PPE supplies and staffing. For the future, we need to ensure that we continue to build a true partnership rather than a commercial relationship. Let us build on that principle as we plan for the future and look to a better life after COVID-19.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for his statement. Before we proceed to questions, for which I will allow about an hour, I reiterate my earlier point that we need to have short, sharp, focused questions.

There are 20 members listed as wanting to ask a question. If the questions are kept short and sharp and the answers too, we will get through them, and everyone will be able to ask a question.

Mr Gildernew (Committee Chair - Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber today and for his statement. Like him, I offer my condolences to the 347 families who have been bereaved as a result of COVID-19.

I also share your concern about the situation with social distancing. I have noticed a significant increase in traffic today compared with last week. Along with you, I appeal to people to go out only for essential journeys. We are not out of the woods here, and it is important to recognise that. If anything, we may have arrived at a clearing from which we can look back at the path that we have been on, and we can use that to advise how we move forward.

We know that the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Michael McBride, is classified as an observer at Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) meetings and can submit questions only in writing. Have you raised the issue of the unequal status of our Chief Medical Officer and, indeed, that of all the other Administrations', given the unique circumstances that we and, probably, each of the other areas face? We have an obvious need to tailor plans here to our unique circumstances. Can you outline what issues the CMO has raised in his written questions to SAGE and provide us with the questions that he asked of the group?

Mr Swann: Once again, I thank the Chair and members of the Health Committee for their continued resolve in getting the message out about social distancing and the need for people to stay at home. As regards the written questions that the Chief Medical Officer has supplied to SAGE, I do not have those with me. Maybe, if the member had given me a bit of warning that that was where he wanted to go, I could have done some work to prepare. It was not even part of my statement.

We are able to raise questions at the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. The Executive are able to do that. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister sit in on COBRA briefings, where we get feedback from SAGE. That advice does come back. I can certainly get the member the written questions. I will provide them to the Committee in the normal way, if that suits.

Mr Gildernew: My additional question is around the fact that, thankfully, the surge has not been as bad as was expected, which has, potentially, created some capacity in hospital settings. Could that capacity be utilised to delay the discharge of patients with COVID-19 or of suspected cases where test results have not come back, to provide additional support to that vulnerable sector?

Mr Swann: The Chair makes a valid point. That is something that the trusts are doing. When we brought in the change in testing capacity, it was at the request of care homes. We are testing 48 hours before discharge from hospital, so that the homes know the status of a client or resident coming in.

In regard to the capacity created by the surge plan, our plan took effect over a very short time while we prepared the health service to cope with what we expected to be the worst-case scenario of the number of people with COVID-19. That, thankfully, has not happened, so, across

the Health and Social Care Board, the trusts and the Department, the issue is how we reengage some of those services so that we can start to come back down from the surge plan and utilise some of that capacity in our hospitals.

We are supporting COVID-19 patients in hospital. A number of patients remain hospitalised rather than being returned to a care facility or an independent care home. That assessment is made. I can reassure the Chair that that is done. People are not simply being discharged into care homes without having had that assessment of their medical need.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. I put it on record that my thoughts are with the 347 families who have been bereaved and are going through terrible grief.

Is the Minister confident that his Department is accurately reporting COVID-19-related deaths? Does the total number of deaths include all non-hospital deaths?

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency's announcements have referred to deaths where, following a positive test in the last 28 days, COVID-19 has been recorded as the cause of death. Any death that is COVID-19-related — whether because a GP thinks it is or because it has appeared anywhere on the death certificate — is picked up eventually. In Northern Ireland, death statistics are officially recorded by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). What we have been doing through the PHA, the Department and the daily updates is basically a surveillance report so that we can get an indication of the number of lives that have been lost among those who have tested positive for COVID-19 in the previous 28 days. That is now irrespective of location.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for that clarity. On the back of that answer, is the Minister satisfied that the workforce appeal resulted in adequate numbers of appropriately skilled trust staff to ensure that care home support is at a safe level?

Mr Swann: It is a live issue because we have asked for volunteers within the health and social care system to come and support our care homes. We may get to the stage where some of those care homes require direct intervention and we have to put staff in by direction. One trust may already have had to take those actions in regard to a specific care home or a number of care homes in its locality. Rather than just supplementing the independent and private sector, we are going in and being more hands-on and more proactive and taking a leadership role in some of those homes to make sure that that provision and support is there.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for the statement and his work to date. On behalf of the SDLP, I offer our thoughts, prayers and condolences to the families of the 347 individuals who have lost their lives. It was, of course, right and proper that there was a reconfiguration and clearance of services for the coronavirus pandemic. However, given that, thankfully, due to people's diligence in sticking to the rules, it looks like the numbers needing hospitalisation will not be at the level that was anticipated, is there a plan for or is consideration being given to — you made some reference to this — additional services that were cancelled but that are of critical importance to people, such as cancer screening and coronary care diagnostic work, so

that we are not building up for ourselves a pandemic of a different type later in the year?

Mr Swann: The member makes a very valid point. We did the surge planning and scaling back of services using a risk-based approach. If the member recalls, at that point, we were looking at the horrific scenes in northern Italy, where they had not been able to prepare their health service for the surge of large numbers of people presenting. We did that surge planning deliberately and in preparation using a measured, risk-based and assessed approach to the service, and we scaled back elective care and some screening programmes. A piece of work that has been ongoing for the last number of weeks across the Health and Social Care Board and our trusts is how we reengage some of those services. I make clear to the member that it is about not going back to the way that it was. It is not about going back to exactly what it looked like eight weeks ago. It will be about making sure that we can use capacity strategically and start to scale services up again in those areas where we had to scale back.

He is right: we do not want to build up problems for the future if we can address them now. However, I would say to the member not to perceive empty beds simply as capacity because with those empty beds come additional staff — nurses, ancillary workers, cleaners, doctors — all of whom are working somewhere else in our health and social care sector, should it be in the ICU units or, now, in support of our care homes. It is not just about the bed; it is about the people who make that bed work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Work on that issue is ongoing, and we are conscious of it. That is why we deliberately made the appeal a couple of weeks ago that, "If you need to present to an ED or GP, please do so". We do not want people suffering at home when they should be looking for medical help.

Mr McGrath: I will make a particular case for those waiting on their annual breast-screening reviews. Especially within cancer services, if people feel that they have got past the disease and been treated, they desperately need to know a year later that they are free of it; that will certainly help them.

Mr Swann: The member's point is noted.

Mr Chambers: I add my party's sympathy to all those families who have lost loved ones and to those who remain seriously ill in hospital. I congratulate the Minister and his team for their work to date. I also congratulate the Minister on his efforts to provide transparency throughout this crisis; his presence today is further testimony to that. In the statement, he talked about the heroes that this crisis has produced, none more so than our healthcare workers, and we all concur with that absolutely. Could the Minister tell me what healthcare workers' overall staff absence looks like? How do those figures compare with the rest of GB?

Mr Swann: I thank the member for his question. I understand where he is going, but one thing that I have never done is to try to set a scoreboard out on how well we are doing in comparison with something else. There is one figure that sticks out in my head at this time, and that is that, as of a report yesterday, we have 307 care workers who are off from our trusts with a COVID-19-positive response. Of a staff of over 70,000, that is 0.4% that is off with a positive COVID response. In the region of 2,000 members of staff from our health and social care trusts are self-isolating at this time. That may be because

they are symptomatic, but it is more likely because they have received shielding letters. Those are small numbers, but I do not want to get into scoreboards and comparisons with other areas, because I do not think that that is helpful for us. I think that it is testimony to the work that has been done in our trusts to make sure that their staff are well supported during the past number of weeks that we have been dealing with COVID-19.

Mr Chambers: Thank you for that, Minister. I think that that figure does demonstrate the commitment of our staff and the debt that we owe them. Can the Minister confirm that prompt testing is now available to everyone in the health service?

Mr Swann: As I referred to in the statement, I think that today has seen our highest number of tests that we have been able to complete and report across the different pillars, both in the health and social care system and with the national testing programme. I can give him that commitment because one of the pieces of work that has been done across trusts, from the very early outset, has been to make sure that their staff members had quick and prompt access to testing so that they could get back to work. I think that it is testimony to those groups that are working on the testing and also the national testing facilities that we have been able to expand that recently to include front-line care workers and post office workers. Also, we have been able to start supporting the staff and the residents in care homes to give that reassurance and that bit of security that testing does provide. It is not the silver bullet by any means, but there is a bit of comfort that comes from having a test.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I concur very much with the sympathies expressed today in the Chamber and with the thanks expressed to our healthcare workers. Minister, given that we now have at least 67 care homes where there have been outbreaks of COVID-19, are you not concerned that someone will take a judicial review of your failure to act in regard to deciding to not test all residents and staff regardless of whether or not there has been an outbreak?

Mr Swann: I thank the member, and I can give her an update. As I left the office today, the number is at 70 care homes. That is out of 425 care homes. It is not an acceptable number, but it is not what we have seen with COVID-19 across the rest of Europe in similar homes. I can say to members that the number of judicial reviews that I currently have in the Department on various aspects of how we have dealt with COVID-19 and on other aspects of the health service is not something that I am worried about at this time because, as Health Minister, I am worried about saving lives. The judicial reviews and inquiries will come. There will be a time for that, but it is a time that I am not willing to be distracted about now.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you. Minister, are you going to bring forward mobile testing facilities so that you can go out to those homes and be more rapid with the response of the health protection unit in the PHA?

Mr Swann: We have people already going into homes to do testing, because that is the only way that we can get people in those facilities tested. It is impractical to bring them to a facility in the hospitals or to one of the drive-through facilities, so, when we do need to test people who

are in care homes, we go to them. That is the only service that suits those workers and the residents.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement and for doing such a good job. Keep that up. GPs are now allowed to test patients who maybe have respiratory conditions. Is there any room for that to be scoped out further for any other conditions to help with increasing the testing numbers?

Mr Swann: The point that the member raises is in regard to our influenza spotting system, which is in 36 GP facilities across Northern Ireland. That is something that we do annually to see where flu outbreaks are. It is utilising them because they have the capacity and knowledge of how to do it, and that is why we specifically asked them and utilised them to step up that service for COVID-19 testing.

We focused on respiratory problems because they are an indicator for COVID-19. People with respiratory conditions may be additionally susceptible to COVID-19. We specifically target patients who come forward with those conditions, and we have increased the testing to include anybody who is going in for elective or emergency operations. They are tested before they go into hospital to make sure that, once they have been through their surgeries or procedures, COVID-19 does not cause additional problems with their recovery process.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members, before I call Mr Easton for his supplementary question, could I say that, if you have only one question or do not want to use a supplementary question, that is fine?

Mr Easton: Just to follow up on testing, will the Minister give us details of how many staff have been tested? I know that he mentioned how many had contracted COVID-19.

Mr Swann: I think that it is referenced in the statement. So far, about 7,000 trust staff have been tested. Of the 22,000 people who have been tested, roughly one in three have been healthcare staff.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for his statement. As childcare falls directly under his departmental responsibility, will the Minister tell us why, weeks after the shutdown of schools and many childcare settings, key workers who are seeking childcare provision, as well as childcare providers who are seeking support, find it extremely difficult to register an interest or to access the schemes?

Mr Swann: Sorry, Sinéad: is that people applying or the providers?

Ms Ennis: Both.

Mr Swann: In regard to the providers, there is a piece of work by us and Education that I can forward to you. I think that you wrote to me; I am not sure whether you have received the response. If not, I will forward it to you. It is on the exact application process and where to go for providers. For the key workers who need childcare, that has been established, and it should have been working over the last two or three weeks. I know personally of key workers who have utilised that and had access to it. If the member has specific cases that she needs me to look into, I am more than happy to take it on.

On the childcare providers, a joint statement will come out from me and Education in the next couple of days on how the financial support and guidance will work. I can follow that up with the member.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for his statement and for all the work that he has done to date. I am sure that you are exhausted, Minister, it has been a very trying time. I also express my condolences to those who have found themselves bereaved at this dreadful time and are not able to mourn in the way that most of us have for our losses.

Minister, I would like to draw your attention to the issue of community nurses and community care workers, who, as you will be aware, have to enter people's homes and go from home to home. I have been contacted by constituents who are somewhat concerned that, whilst others engaged in activities with patients have access to freshly laundered scrubs and full gowns, care workers are provided merely with an apron, a mask and gloves. They have to return to their homes either between shifts or before going out to do the night-time calls. They are concerned not only for their patients' safety but for the safety of their own families. Have you considered or will you review the PPE provided to those who are transferring from home to home and give consideration to full gowns and so on to protect those people, in order that the risk is minimised as they transfer from house to house, potentially carrying infection?

Mr Swann: I am fully aware of the concerns that the member has raised. We put out detailed guidance in regard to PPE and the facilities and settings that it should be used in. That was supported by the Chief Medical Officers and Chief Nursing Officers across all four nations and by the royal colleges, including the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Surgeons. That PPE guidance is there and is done at the national level.

One of the things that the Department did relates to the point that the member makes about individuals who have to return home with the scrubs or clothes that they have been wearing all day. We approached councils through the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) to see whether they could open up changing areas in sporting facilities to allow those people to shower and change before they go home. I am not sure of the uptake by trusts or those providers, but I think that Belfast City Council did it, and I know that my council — Mid and East Antrim Borough Council — was in contact with the local trust to see whether that was something that it would take up. It is by looking at those imaginative partnership ways that we can provide additional support to those people, who have vital roles and are carrying out vital work in our community at a difficult time.

Ms Bunting: My supplementary question will be brief. My constituents are grateful that councils have, indeed, allowed those people to avail themselves of showering facilities and so on prior to going home. However, the issue remains that they take off a set of clothes, put on a clean uniform and are out again twice the next day and twice the day after that. They seek full gowns. I appreciate that there are protocols across the UK, but I would be grateful if you would see whether other things could be done to provide them with full gowns or more coverage than an apron for their clothes.

Mr Swann: Gowns are specific pieces of PPE that are used in specific medical settings, so they are not just like the general aprons that we talk about. I will look at that so that we understand that we are using the right language for what they want, but I am more than happy to have that conversation with the member and any individuals she may know.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for his statement and echo the comments from across the Chamber. There is broad cross-party support, as well as a commitment in NDNA, for the graduate-entry medical school in Derry, which is now even more important in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. I congratulate all the student healthcare workers who have gone into the breach. Can the Minister give us a firm timeline for when his Department will approve the north-west medical school on the Magee campus?

Mr Swann: The member's question has varied slightly from the statement, but the point is well made. That is a conversation that has been had at Executive level, because, whereas the number of medical students falls within my Department's remit — that is where our business case lies — the actual physical building and the support of the school, for want of a better word, cross-cuts Economy, Finance and the rest of the Executive. That is something that her colleague the Finance Minister and I are talking about. The business case for the number of students falls within my remit — we should finish that business case very soon — but where those students go does not lie solely with my Department. It is a wider Executive discussion.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for his hard work, and I echo others' condolences.

Minister, in your statement, which I welcome, you talked in more detail about contact tracing. The statement says that you think that there will be about 300 people working on contact tracing in the coming weeks. It would be helpful to know whether you see that as the long-term average that we need for contact tracing. I know that Matt Hancock talked the other day about having 18,000 UK-wide; I do not know the equivalent number in the Republic. It would be helpful to know as we go through the next stage of COVID-19, including moving towards the new normal that we talk about, how many people, you think, we will need for contact tracing here.

Mr Swann: We have taken on the first cohort, which is the pilot, to make sure of the algorithm or script that we use. It is far changed from what we did initially with the PHA in our first case, a couple of months ago. Our estimate at the minute is 300, but there is potential, depending on where the virus is and how it is spread, that that could move up to 600, which is a considerable workforce and a considerable number of people carrying out a very specific task. Our estimate at this minute in time in week 4 is about 300, and then it will be an allocation and a decision about how many active cases we have. If we are still, as a society, mostly locked down, there will not be that many cases to trace, but, as we start to come out of lockdown and ease various restrictions, that is when we will need contact tracers. One of the things that Members need to be aware of — it is a discussion that I have had with Executive colleagues — is that contact tracing is not just about identifying who has the virus and whom they spread it to; it is also about the advice that you give them and them being able to back that up with the support. If you contact somebody and I have it, we contact you and you are contact traced, Matthew, and then somebody says, "Right, you have to go into self-isolation", we, as an Executive and as an Assembly need to make sure that there is a support mechanism that kicks in for you, your family and anybody who is around you while you self-isolate for the next two weeks. It is about more than just finding out who has the virus; it is about

ensuring that the support mechanism that we have utilised over the past number of weeks in Northern Ireland is also there going forward. It is a very big piece of work, and it will take an awful lot of commitment across all Executive Departments.

Mr O'Toole: I will be brief. I thank the Minister for that update. Following on from his comments and what he said about contact tracing, his statement says — I welcome it — that contact tracing will have to be done, particularly in border areas, on a cross-border basis and that they are working on interoperability in terms of process and software, but his statement also says:

“There is work to be done on what information would be systemically shared and under what legal and information governance framework.”

That is really important. At the minute, the UK is still in the information governance framework in the context of the EU. At the end of the year, we do not know what information governance framework we will be in. We will probably still be contact tracing and people will still be moving from Dundalk to Newry and Buncrana to Derry. Is there a risk that, if we leave the transition period without a deal and there is legal uncertainty around our information governance framework, that that would throw contact tracing, particularly in border areas, into risk?

Mr Swann: During project Yellowhammer the specific pieces of work that we were doing on health were about sharing health information on the island. That is why I am clear in the statement that there is work to be done. We think that there may be a legal basis on which we can share that information, but what detail and what level of information we share is still to be worked out. This is early days stuff, and this is new to this island, the UK and Europe when we look to how we start to do that level of contact tracing. When it comes to the legalities and who holds the information — is it held in your phone, or is it held in a central database? — that all has to be finished out. When it comes to the protocols and we get the app and the contact tracing up and running, our focus is, again, “Let us get it up and running, and then we will work around the rest of it when we get to the end of year and we see where we are in regard to how that wider piece in regard to Brexit is working”.

Mr Nesbitt: I put on my record my admiration and my thanks for the leadership that the Minister is showing. There is certainly authority and knowledge, but it is mixed with a tone and a calmness that are incredibly reassuring for our population, who are clearly scared and have been for some weeks.

Minister, you mentioned mental health. Would you take the opportunity to expand on your decision to appoint a mental health champion and on what, you hope, that person will achieve?

Mr Swann: I thank the member for his comments. We shared another post that gives you that training *[Laughter.]* The mental health champion was an action that was already there in our mental health action plan. As I see where the virus is taking us and society and the strains and stresses that it puts not just on society in general but on the front-line workers in my health service, in our care homes and all the rest of it, I think that, when we come out of the pandemic, we will be in a more challenging place.

We were already in a serious place in regard to mental health in Northern Ireland, and it was one of the main issues that I was working on before coronavirus appeared or showed its face here. On the idea of a champion, I am not embarrassed to say that it was the member's idea that I stole and took credit for, but it is one that we need in Northern Ireland and in the Executive as well, rather than just another departmental official to look at what we do and how we do it.

Like Northern Ireland's commissioners, the champion will be a critical friend who can actually step up, step out and say, “No, you are not doing that right. You are not doing enough. You have to push further and harder”. Out of all the actions that were in the mental health action plan, that is the one on which we needed to lean, so that, when the mental health action plan comes forward and the strategy is published, we already have somebody there who can be that critical friend and challenge us.

Mr Nesbitt: With regard to the application and appointment process, I encourage the Minister to use what might be described as a “light touch”. I say that because, having applied to become a victims' commissioner, I found that the period between the interview and my appointment was something like 18 months.

Mr Swann: The member will know that I do not have that sort of patience.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I extend my sympathy to the families of those who have lost their lives and assure them of my thoughts and prayers.

Can the Minister advise whether his Department has engaged with other organisations on work to find a potential vaccine for the virus that is in our midst?

Mr Swann: Work to find a vaccine is going on globally across many health professions, departments and chemical labs. I think that Queen's University has received a bursary to support the search for a vaccine. Northern Ireland is taking part in the UK medical trials that are trialling drugs that are already there that could help to alleviate the symptoms and worst ravages of COVID-19. The Chief Medical Officer chairs that programme across the United Kingdom, so Northern Ireland will be fully part of any medical trial of a drug that is already established, which will shorten the period that it takes to enable a drug to be utilised for COVID-19 so that we are not starting from scratch with a completely newly created drug.

Mr McAleer: I welcome the fact, Minister, that you have plans in place to appoint the mental health champion as part of plans to improve services overall. Can you detail whether there are any plans to prepare for the anticipated surge in the need for mental health services following the lockdown period due to COVID-19?

Mr Swann: As I said in response to Mr Nesbitt, we were starting to tackle the problem with mental health services before COVID-19. That problem is not going away: it is getting worse. We know that from experience in our communities, Mr McAleer. The stresses and strains that have been put on individuals and families by asking them to self-isolate will manifest themselves in the future. As I said, when it came to the mental health strategy and action plan, one of my key aims was to get the champion in place, so that they could start to challenge us on what we do and how we prepare.

There is already a mental health workforce in the National Health Service. They have had to work differently. They are having many more conversations and counselling sessions online and over the telephone, rather than face to face, because of social distancing. However, where somebody needs a face-to-face counselling session, that is still being provided. In our preparations, we are fully cognisant of people's struggles and strains and, as I said, of the pressure that is being put on our staff at this minute in time. Working with trusts and trade union colleagues, we were able to put in place a psychological support mechanism for our front-line workers so that they can find additional support. They are working through a very strenuous period at this minute in time.

Mr McAleer: I suggest that there are specific issues that relate to isolation in rural areas. I am very familiar with that, having been involved in my local COVID-19 response operation. Many very isolated people live in rural communities. I suggest that, when you look at plans for the mental health champion, you work closely with, for example, charities such as Rural Support and, indeed, the wider Rural Community Network to reach out to those hard-to-reach people in rural communities? Their mental health issues are compounded by the fact that they are isolated from the rest of the community and society.

Mr Swann: The member makes a valid point. I am sure that he remembers from our time in the Agriculture Committee that I used to be a board member of Rural Support so I know the work that they do and the challenges they face because our rural population is, more so, an elderly population. We have seen how society has stood together in rural societies and urban societies. Rural organisations, such as the GAA clubs or Orange lodges are coming together to really support and look after their own. One of the things coming out of the pandemic is that we see a strengthening of our communities. When we ask people to self-isolate and shield, we are not asking them to leave their communities, and we see communities stepping up and supporting those who need it. With regard to the member's specific question, as a former board member of Rural Support, I am fully aware of the work that needs to be done.

Mr Lyttle: The Health Minister has recognised the work of private-sector care providers in Northern Ireland and has challenged us to properly fund and partner with those organisations. His Department is responsible for funding and partnering childcare providers. Can the Minister provide an update on the implementation of the £12 million childcare assistance package that he announced on 9 April?

Mr Swann: I will go back to the question that Sinéad asked on that. There is a statement coming out from me and the Minister of Education — it is a co-funded, co-sponsored programme — on how we support those organisations and individuals. The detail of that should be announced shortly.

Mr Lyttle: I look forward to the details of that announcement. The Irish Government have implemented a package with 100% salary costs and 15% of total salary costs to cover other costs for childcare providers in the Republic of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, childcare providers continue to wait for any funding. I believe that they have to apply for that funding and may receive only up to 80% of costs. I encourage the Health Minister to provide

whatever help and assistance he can to our childcare sector.

Mr Swann: As I have said, that announcement will be made soon. I will make sure that, as Chair of the Education Committee, he gets first sight of it or is fully briefed on it.

Mr Hilditch: As the meeting has gone on, I have been ticking the questions off my sheet so I do not have a lot more to ask. Certainly, it was a robust and honest statement outlining the stark realities of where we are today.

There is an argument going on about the resumption of the Irish Premiership football league. Most sports called a halt when the Government asked for the lockdown. Tomorrow is the 1 May; they are talking about maybe four weeks' time. What would your advice, as Health Minister, be on looking at the end of May for such a resumption? Maybe advice has been sought from you.

Mr Swann: I say to the member that, as a Ballymena supporter, I am in no rush back [*Laughter.*] Sorry, Chair.

As Health Minister, I have to be careful and weighted in any suggestions that I make. The way that we work through the regulations jointly, as an Executive, is that, when it comes to each three-week period, there are discussions about what measures could be lifted or what measures should be lifted. It is always done with medical advice and guidance that comes through my Department from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. I do not want to make any commitments or give any direction of travel on any specifics. If it is something that he has raised with his party colleagues, I am sure it is in the mix of things to be looked at in the next phase of how we approach the regulations.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): A supplementary, Mr Hilditch?

Mr Hilditch: No.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): You are grand.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I thank the Minister for his statement. Can the Minister outline what progress has been made in developing a joined-up approach to tackling coronavirus across the island in light of the recent memorandum of understanding between North and South? How will that inform our approach to testing, tracing and data collection in the context of the future easing of restrictions?

Mr Swann: Before coming into the Chamber, I had — I cannot remember what it is called — a quad call, I think it is now called, Pat, involving the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Tánaiste, the Health Minister of the Republic of Ireland, the Secretary of State and me. It is exactly what the Member is asking about: how we make sure that we are in keeping with each other on both sides of the border so that there is not an adverse effect from somebody moving at a different time or taking a different outlook or approach.

As I explained at that meeting, the memorandum of understanding has not changed the way that Simon and I or our two Chief Medical Officers work together or even how the Public Health Agency and the Health in the Republic of Ireland work together. It was more formalising that working relationship by putting it in writing, as we have always had a good cross-border working relationship on

health. Simon Harris, our two Chief Medical Officers, our two permanent secretaries and I have another call this evening to discuss contact tracing. We will have to look at the specifics when it comes to people going back and forth across the border, including the technologies that they use that we could use. We have actually adopted some of them. It is about sharing common intelligence and best practice. That works well at this minute in time because it worked well in the past.

Mr Sheehan: I want to pick up on the issue of technology and the proposed phone apps for tracing. As you said, Minister, a large number of people go back and forth across the border for essential work and so on, and, if restrictions are eased, that number will increase. One of the difficulties that we have witnessed in recent years is that, when ideas are formulated in London or the south of England, we are forgotten about. It is essential that you provide leadership in that context and take cognisance of the unique situation that exists on this island. I wonder whether you will give a commitment to do that.

Mr Swann: The Member makes a fair point. One of the things to have come out of this situation is, as I say, a good working relationship with Minister Harris in the Republic of Ireland and with the other three Health Ministers across the devolved Administrations. I will not say that we have benefited, as that may not be the right word, but, because we are the conduit between both, we can pick up the best ideas from everybody. We have a great working relationship. That is why I say specifically in the statement that the apps, the database, the IT that we use and the scripts for contact tracing have all been picked up from the Republic of Ireland, as we have seen what they have been able to do. They utilise the Irish Army for most of their contact tracing. They brought the army in at a very early stage, as it was a readily available workforce.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his answers. I also applaud him on his decision to appoint a mental health champion. With the rest of the Chamber, I offer my condolences to the many families who are grieving but have not been able to mourn their loss in our unique and special Irish way. I put on record my appreciation of communities, GAA clubs, sporting organisations, schools, Our Lady's Grammar School in Newry, my old school — Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School — and the companies that have come together to produce almost a million pieces of PPE to help to protect our front-line workers. I am especially proud to be a Lislea man today, as a popular local Lislea clan, the Dohertys, through their company, Re-Gen Waste Management, have generously contributed £60,000 worth of PPE to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

Minister, I have been contacted today by families who have members suffering from cystic fibrosis. I am advised that the regional centre in Belfast City Hospital is closed and that up to 300 patients have been affected and have been told to contact their local hospital if they need assistance. Local hospitals advise them to attend their emergency department. You will understand the concerns that cystic fibrosis sufferers have about transmitting or contracting an infection by attending such facilities. Will the Minister review that decision in light of the fear being experienced by cystic fibrosis patients in the North and provide updates and guidance on how they should proceed?

Mr Swann: In his opening comments, the member paid tribute to the community organisations that are doing so much and the businesses that support our health service. As I said in my statement, I thank and applaud them for stepping up at this time.

The Belfast facility for cystic fibrosis was one of the central resources that were stepped down at an early point in the surge plan because we were cognisant of how susceptible those patients were and how damaging COVID-19 could be if somebody with cystic fibrosis contracted it. That was one of the early decisions that were made. As I said, as we re-engage services, those in the community who need specialised health support and guidance will get it. I will check on the guidance that has been issued to people suffering from cystic fibrosis and their families to make sure that it is up to date and appropriate, as we look at re-engaging some of our services and at where that can fit in. I will do that and get back to the member.

Mr McNulty: Will the technological apps that are being developed for contact tracing be the modern-day equivalent of the medieval practice of lepers hanging a sign around their neck to say that they had the disease? How will it operate in practice for someone who has contracted COVID-19? Will there be a flagging system for people nearby to move away? How will it operate?

Mr Swann: We are not moving into those scenarios. Say, for instance, the member had got a positive test result in the past two days. The intention is that the app in his phone would have carried where he had been over the past two days, link into all the phones that were close to him within those two days and send an anonymous message to say, for instance, "Last Thursday, you were in the ED of Craigavon hospital at 2.00 pm. A positive case has been located in that area. Please consider getting tested or self-isolating". An alarm system will not appear on your phone; it is not something that will forever tag you. I do not like the leper analogy that the member used. It is not that; it is about encouraging somebody to seek the appropriate medical advice and guidance so that we can make sure that we contain the spread of COVID-19. However, we will not do it solely through the app. Further to the queries that were made earlier, we will still have the physical presence of people who will phone individuals and make sure that the contact is made. Not everybody will have a phone, the app or the inclination to have such an app on their phone. We will use old-fashioned telephone calls to contact people as well as using the app. It is utilising what technology can do.

Mr Catney: Minister, I also support your decision to have a champion for mental health. That will be great. I also support your kind words for those who have been bereaved.

Will you make an urgent statement highlighting the anticipated pressures that could exist in accessing each of the six essential items of PPE? Will the standards of production that are required for each item be set out in an effort to encourage more local businesses to consider temporarily repurposing their resources?

Mr Swann: Those specifications are already online through the Central Procurement Directorate. That was one of the pieces of work that we were able to do very early on between Health and Finance: approaching our local businesses about who could step up and repurpose.

Off the top of my head, we have already seen O'Neills producing scrubs, and Bloc Blinds and Huhtamaki are producing face visors. Very shortly, a company in Northern Ireland will be making gowns, which are one of the more critical, hard-to-get pieces of PPE across the world. So, to see our own industry stepping up and being able to manufacture those is something that we should be immensely proud of.

As I referred to earlier, as well as in my statement, it puts that challenge back to us as a health service and as a society where we have been so reliant on that just-in-time international supply chain always being there. In the early days of this pandemic, we saw that the supply chain from China was not there when we thought it would be simply a case of lifting the phone and making that order. So, the repurposing of our local industry is especially important, but all those specifications of those PPE items are online and are available. They are not hidden or secret. They are there for anybody who wants to try to make PPE for us.

Mr Catney: Minister, what I was really trying to get at was that, across all these islands — Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales — no matter where it is, we must outsource that and get as much PPE made as we possibly can in order to help the supply lines.

Mr Swann: I can reassure the member about that. One thing that I made clear at the start was that the three pillars of supply that we have are: what we are getting nationally; what we are getting internationally; and what we can make locally. The more surety that we have of a local supply line, be it anywhere across these islands, the better that it is for us. It is about rebuilding the stockpile: not only what we are using currently but what we have used from the stockpile that we had in place in the event of a pandemic. We have had to use some of that stockpile. It is about replacing that stockpile because, if there is a second or third surge, I do not want Northern Ireland or its health service to be in this position again.

Ms Bailey: It is really encouraging to hear about some of the overdue measures to address contact tracing because, as the Minister stressed, it is really clear that contact tracing, in combination with widely available testing, will have a huge part to play in our exiting the coronavirus lockdown.

Evidence given this week by Matt Hancock to the Health Select Committee at Westminster suggested that, as the Minister noted, they are running contact tracing via national phone banks and an app. There are, of course, significant privacy issues and threats to civil liberties from the use of such technology. Can the Minister give us a bit more detail on who will own the IT systems and the apps and who will have access to all data collected on those systems?

Mr Swann: The member makes a well-made point, and it is something that I am having a conversation about, and the Justice Minister raised it in the Executive when we started to have these conversations. It was in response to a member asking who owns the data. Will the data be held in your phone or will it be held centrally? It has to be used for the right purpose.

My intention is that it will be held as locally and as personally as possible, but I have to see the development of the app and where it comes from. The app is not mine to develop. We are seeing how it works, but I want to make

sure that it is fit for purpose and is not used as some sort of Big Brother tool.

When Matt Hancock brought the proposal to the meeting of the four Health Ministers, I made him well aware that it is not just about who owns the data; it is about the political sensitivities of such an app here in Northern Ireland. The Welsh and Scottish Ministers pointed out that they also had political sensitivities about who would own the data. It is an issue that is being worked on. We are still looking at the app being probably two to three weeks away, so all those issues are being worked on across these nations.

Ms Bailey: Following on from that, Westminster has announced a five-point list that must be met before the lockdown measures can be loosened. In Northern Ireland, could we perhaps add contact tracing and community shield mechanisms to that list?

Mr Swann: As I said earlier, contact tracing and additional shielding is one point that we need to be cognisant of. There is no point in just sending somebody a message saying, "You have been in contact with somebody who has COVID-19". You have to be able to step in and support them and their family at that time. So, while we have not published a list, it is a point that I have made to my Executive colleagues. The support mechanisms that we have in regard to furloughing, food boxes and additional benefits will all have to continue in a different form or in the same form as we roll out contact tracing because we have a responsibility if we are telling somebody to self-isolate or shield themselves from society to stop the spread of coronavirus, we have to make sure that we are there to support them.

Mr Allister: I want to return to the theme of making up the lost ground for non-COVID patients within the health service. Understandable as the singular focus on COVID-19 is, a knock-on effect for those who had procedures, screenings and testing cancelled has undoubtedly been that there is now an increased risk, particularly for cancer patients, of accelerated death. Therefore, will the Minister give more detail as to how he is going to make up the lost ground for those people? At the end of this, cancer patients are still going to be cancer patients, and yet they have missed tests, they have missed treatments and they have missed screenings. We really do need to know how, when and with what expedition that ground is going to be made up.

Mr Swann: I cannot give the member an exact timeline or date today, and I do not think that he would expect me to. It is about the re-engagement plan that we are looking at. What will that mean? I will be blunt with members: we have always expected that our closest hospital is where our procedure will happen, but, when we start to re-engage services, people who need treatment and operations may have to, and will have to, travel to central locations. I had a conversation yesterday with the Royal College of Surgeons. There is a perception that we would have COVID hospitals and non-COVID hospitals. However, the Royal College of Surgeons said that there will be no such thing as a non-COVID hospital because there is no way to guarantee that. There may be COVID-neutral facilities, where we can start to re-engage our surgeries, screening and other procedures.

I ask the member to reflect on that fact that, when I took over this post, we had the worst waiting lists across these

islands. They have got worse. The action that we will need to take will have to involve the independent sector and running our hospitals to capacity, when we have that capacity. At the same time, we cannot risk re-engaging too many procedures and services too quickly because, if we are hit with an unforeseen second surge, we will not be able to cope with those people presenting with COVID-19.

I can reassure the member that work to re-establish those services is ongoing in my Department, but where we do it as well as when we do it must be considered. There can be no sacred cows when we re-engage some of the services. We must look at where we do it and how we do it.

Mr Allister: On a different theme, what advice does the Minister have on the issue of the general public wearing masks when they are out and about? Is that desirable? Is that suggested, or is that something that is dismissed? Certainly, I have had a number of constituents asking me whether they should or should not wear a mask. Therefore, I would like to hear from the Health Minister: should they or should they not?

Mr Swann: I thank the member. I know the issue was raised recently by the Scottish First Minister. We are weighing up the scientific advice as to the benefit that it could or would bring. One of the concerns that I have about wearing cloth face masks is that it could lead to the perception that some of the other precautions, such as social distancing and good hand hygiene, are no longer necessary, or those actions could become less of a priority. Wearing a cloth face mask might give somebody a sense of immunity that the mask, actually, does not provide. So, we are waiting on the scientific advice on the wearing of a cloth face mask.

I will say to members that if people think that wearing a cloth face mask is of benefit to them, plead with them not to look to the medical supplies: when you are out and about, doing your shopping or on your daily walk, do not use the supplies that are needed by our healthcare workers and our domiciliary care workers. Make sure that that medical-grade PPE is there for the people who need it and utilise it in the right space at the right time.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. I hope that he agrees with me that any consideration of lifting the lockdown, before contact tracing and other World Health Organization measures are in place, would be very worrying and deeply dangerous. Does the Minister think that it was a mistake not to start contact tracing as soon as we started to treat people for COVID-19?

Mr Swann: Going back to when we had our first cases, PHA was doing a piece of contract tracing. When we moved to a place where we asked everybody to lock down, there was no longer a wider benefit in contact tracing. Where we are going now, with regard to the pilot, is that we have started moving up to 300 people in the next four weeks. That is exactly to support individuals and society as they come out of lockdown so that, when we get positive cases, we can contact trace them, track them and ask them to isolate very quickly, so that we can shut down the spread of COVID-19 in society in Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that people are very concerned about being told that they have to go back into work, especially in non-essential businesses, at this time. Does the Minister believe that we need to rapidly recruit health and safety inspectors to

ensure that, when people go back to work en masse — hopefully, not any time soon — we have enough inspectors to guarantee that workplaces are safe for workers?

Mr Swann: My colleague the Minister for the Economy has set up a workplace forum to deal with specific queries like that, including which workplaces are essential. She has issued guidance as to what is essential work, which workplaces are essential and which workplaces are not. Maintaining social distance in the workplace remains beneficial and is helping to prevent the spread of coronavirus in Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): That concludes questions on the statement. By my reckoning, the Minister got to his feet at 2.54 pm. It is now 3.57 pm, and, during that time, he answered 37 questions from members. I thank the Minister for being here and answering the questions. On a personal note, I wish him every success in the job that he is undertaking, because his success is our success, and it makes our community safer. So, God bless.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

7 May 2020

Ministerial Statement: Economy

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Mr Cathal Boylan
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Ms Linda Dillon
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Paul Givan
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Colin McGrath
Ms Sinead McLaughlin
Mr Gary Middleton
Mr Andrew Muir
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr John Stewart
Mr Jim Wells
Miss Rachel Woods

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Members are welcome to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response.

Agenda item 1 is the minutes of proceedings of the previous meeting, which was held on 30 April. Members are asked to note the minutes, which Mr Stalford has agreed. Members should also note that the minutes of evidence from that meeting have been published in the Official Report, which is available on the Committee's web page.

Members, before we move on, I want to refer to the fact that we have just one ministerial statement today. On 30 April, the Minister of Justice informed the Speaker's Office that she wished to make a statement to the Committee at today's meeting. However, the Speaker's Office received notice from the Minister yesterday afternoon that she wished to defer making her statement until next week. As a result, the Speaker's Office notified all members yesterday that there will just be one Minister making a statement on this occasion.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the Minister for the Economy. The Speaker received notification on 28 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc

Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in your pack at page 7.

I welcome the Minister for the Economy to this meeting of the Committee. Before she makes her statement, I want to remind members that, following it, there will be an opportunity for questions — not to make speeches. As has happened on previous occasions, members who ask sharp, focused questions will be afforded the opportunity to ask a supplementary question. However, if contributions are long-winded, I may have to move on. As we wish to afford every member the opportunity to ask questions, I also seek the cooperation of the Minister and ask her to endeavour to be succinct in her answers. I therefore intend to follow the same approach as previously. I invite the Minister to make her statement, which should be heard by members without interruption.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Deputy Chairperson.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Point of order, Mr Allister. I would highlight that this is not a meeting of the Assembly, during which normal points of order would be taken, but I will hear what you have to say.

Mr Allister: I am obliged. You said in your introduction that copies of the statement had been circulated. I can speak only for myself, but I understand that others are in the same position. I have certainly not received a copy of the statement, so I would like to know how and when it was distributed and why the process has failed.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): All the relevant papers for today's meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee were included in the electronic meeting pack, which would have been circulated to members and made available for them to access. If any member finds that that did not happen, I ask them to come back to the Speaker's Office and we will investigate further. I understand that it was circulated and made available electronically, and I hope that we can move on.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you, colleagues, for the opportunity to address you once again on the critical issues for the economy, particularly as this crisis unfolds.

It is now two months since the dramatic but necessary changes to our way of life were first implemented. Sadly, what was once unimaginable is now the new reality. I took office just under four short months ago. Back then,

I set out my ambition to introduce parental bereavement leave, grow the tourism sector, stimulate investment and job creation, and, importantly, direct more funding into skills for future generations. Yet, in what seemed like a heartbeat, the brutal impact of coronavirus on the health of the population and economy has transformed those priorities.

Make no mistake: the top priority is still the preservation of life. That will remain our primary focus until such times as the threat of COVID-19 has diminished sufficiently. Our next and necessary priority is to mitigate the impacts on the economy as best we can and do all that is in our power to aid recovery. We have lived through downturns, but this is different. The usual remedy of encouraging people to go out and spend money in order to boost the economy is not possible or, indeed, appropriate right now.

The Executive, like our counterparts in London, have acted swiftly and decisively. We have redirected resources to cushion the devastating early impacts, and will continue to do so. This week, my Department received Executive approval for £40 million to set up a hardship fund for microbusinesses. That will aid thousands of the smallest enterprises, as well as charities and social enterprises.

The financial grant schemes for business rates relief, bank lending scheme, job retention scheme, and support for the self-employed have been essential to prevent the economy from imploding. The painstakingly deliberate pace of developing Government policy has been replaced with immediate action in order to deliver the targeted assistance that protects as many incomes as possible. As of yesterday, over 19,000 payments of £10,000 have been issued to small businesses, totalling £190 million. We have received over 3000 applications for the recently opened £25,000 scheme, with over 800 payments already having been made.

Be in no doubt that we are truly in uncharted waters, and normal rules no longer apply. By effectively putting our economy into deep freeze, and allowing employers to retain staff by furloughing them, we have ushered many businesses away from failure. However, there is a direct link between the population's health and the health of the economy. The longer that people are away from the workplace, the greater the impact will be on the economy. Crucially, however, that significant Government intervention will also assist recovery. Businesses can ramp up much more quickly when they retain their workforce and institutional knowledge.

We are prepared for the possibility that the economic recovery will not be as rapid as the decline. Government, both nationally and locally, will again need to support businesses across various sectors. However, I believe in Northern Ireland's business community. Many businesses faced the economic downturn in 2008 and emerged more efficient. Today, they are adapting once more by demonstrating agility and resilience in the face of adversity. They have stepped up to the challenge by doing what is necessary. Some companies have repurposed production lines in order to build ventilators, others are importing personal protective equipment (PPE) and others have found new ways to reach and support customers.

There is no such thing as a non-essential business in a modern economy. The importance of interconnected supply chains and support networks has demonstrated

our reliance on those who produce and sell food, keep the lights on and keep freight moving. New business models are already beginning to emerge as a result of the disruption. Many companies have become more local and less global in the short to medium term.

Our daily work patterns are transforming. We have all become much more accustomed to working remotely, using technology to hold video conferences and conducting business without the need to travel. Many who are preparing to join the workforce are now learning from home. Further education colleges and universities are delivering support to students through virtual and remote learning. That is essential because a fully skilled workforce will form part of the foundation of recovery. This week, I announced that we have removed the 25% employer contribution to Skills Focus. That will allow furloughed staff to gain accredited qualifications and return to work upskilled.

Yesterday, my Department launched a pilot postgraduate course in software development with Queen's University, offering a fully funded part-time course for individuals whose careers have been impacted by COVID-19. My Department has also partnered with the Open University to provide online learning that is free for workers. While this year it is impossible for our further and higher education students to sit exams in a conventional way, it is good that arrangements are in place for them to receive their qualifications and move forward into the workplace or go on to further study. We will need their skills when the time comes.

The darkest days of this economic disaster are not at all behind us yet. We still need to help businesses survive and incomes must be protected, but we also need to start plotting a course to recovery. This week, the Executive announced that they would match-fund £562 million for city and growth deals and £55 million for the inclusive futures fund. We will also provide up to an additional £100 million for complementary projects in other areas outside the north-west. This is a crucial injection of funding for all regions of Northern Ireland. Under the four city and growth deals, my Department will play a central role in delivering this investment.

We will support important new projects in innovation, the digital economy, skills and tourism. Set alongside the UK investment, this raises the funding for the Belfast area to £700 million, while mid, south and west is £252 million. Funding for the north-west is £210 million and £72 million for Causeway coast and glens. Not only is this investment essential as we rebuild, it will continue to boost our economy over the next decade.

While I remain firmly focused on today, I am also looking at tomorrow. I am working closely with our business community, our hospitality sector and tourism industry to help them take the first steps to recovery. I have been in discussions with representatives of business about how we can get things moving again by supporting businesses that can work safely to get back to work. I am re-establishing the economic advisory group that was previously in place to advise my predecessors.

I want to ensure that we concentrate on rebuilding an economy that focuses on the areas where we are genuinely world-class, such as tourism, where the greatest opportunities for our young people lie. I have set up the tourism recovery steering group to bring the most influential figures in that sector together to begin the

process of bringing their industry back to where it needs to be. Yesterday, I sat in on the first meeting of the tourism working group, established for the sector to identify the key issues that the steering group will need to address.

Yes, our focus is still on fighting the most immediate and severest impact of this crisis, but it is important that we also start to get the economy moving again and, gradually, see people safely return to work. The truth is that we do not know for certain how long this disruption will last, but we simply cannot shut the economy down, for a significant period of time, without suffering catastrophic consequences.

We stand ready to facilitate a safe return to work when the time is right. This should not be viewed as a trade-off between people's health and the economy. The two are inextricably linked and it is important that the Government, business and the wider society recognises and accepts that. I will continue to support our economy through this period of adversity but I also pledge to do all that I can to restore its confidence. That is why we need to be decisive in our policy choices, adapt to the new global business environment quickly and focus on the sectors where Northern Ireland can genuinely be a world leader. 1.45 pm

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I thank the Minister for her statement. There will now be a period, lasting approximately an hour, of questions. I remind Members of what I said at the start of the meeting: they should not preface their question with a statement or a speech but be concise. There will be an opportunity to ask a supplementary question, and, provided Members cooperate, I will afford them that opportunity; otherwise, I may have to go on. Finally, I also encourage the Minister to give concise, focused answers to Members' questions.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy will, as normal, be given some additional latitude.

Dr Archibald (Committee Chair - Committee for the Economy): I thank the Minister for her statement and for the update. The announcement of the hardship fund this week was welcome. Businesses may have been hoping for more detail on the eligibility criteria, so they may be a bit disappointed.

I would like to reiterate some of the gaps in the schemes announced to date. The grant support has been really welcome, but we heard from the chambers of commerce yesterday, particularly hospitality and retail businesses that are above the net asset value (NAV) of £51,000 and have been unable to access support. Obviously, work is going on on further rate relief, but those businesses highlight the need for cash support right now.

Secondly, in a statement last week, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) wrote to the First Ministers and to the Taoiseach about the need for all-Ireland cooperation and coordination in planning for the recovery. In her statement, the Minister mentioned the re-establishment of the Economic Advisory Group. Has she contacted Departments in the South about coordinating that work and potentially setting up an all-Ireland advisory group on recovery?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Chairperson for her questions and for her cooperation in our work to support the economy. We have weekly conversations about the work of the

Department and the support that the Committee can give in encouraging and in discussing the issues.

First, I am really pleased that we have secured a further £40 million from the Executive for the hardship fund. At the start of next week, I will set out the full criteria for the fund, which will be targeted at small businesses and microbusinesses, those that employ between one and nine people who are paid through a pay-as-you-earn (PAYE) scheme. It will be open to small businesses and microbusinesses, to social economy businesses and to charities that are trading institutions. I will set out the full detail next week. Currently, Invest NI is building the portal so that we can get it online as early as we can, because we anticipate significant demand. We have set some rules for it: if you have qualified for the £10k or the £25k grants, it would be inappropriate for you to be doubly funded while other businesses are not funded. Therefore, there are some rules concerning that issue. That will be out next week. I hope that it will be of benefit to small businesses, particularly to small, emerging businesses and start-ups, which have had a fairly difficult time, particularly those who started their business very recently.

As for gaps in the scheme, such schemes will never cover everybody. The business community is very wide and diverse and encompasses a huge section of businesses. We used the rates system, because we could easily identify businesses in the first instance. We extended the £10k scheme to include small derated businesses and are now working our way through the £25k scheme. As I promised the House, I have ensured that we pay businesses in the £25k scheme as quickly as we can verify their applications. We need to ensure that applications are verified and we pay businesses as quickly as possible. From memory, I think that we have over 3,000 applications to the £25k scheme, and over 800 of those have been paid in the two weeks since the scheme launched.

In terms of businesses that fall through the gaps in current funding schemes, one way that we can support business is through the rates system. In Northern Ireland, the Executive have already approved three months' rate relief for everybody. In England, Scotland or Wales, rate relief for business is targeted only at businesses in tourism, leisure and hospitality. Therefore, we have ensured that more people in the first three months have benefited from rate relief. I have said in the Chamber before and say again that it is my personal view that extending the rate relief so that it matches other parts of the United Kingdom is incredibly important and will be useful. However, I also recognise the problem that the Finance Minister and the Executive have, in that we have a limited amount of money that has to be targeted.

I apologise, but I want to give full answers to these questions; they are on important issues that will come up again. This week, I had a conference call with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and Ulster University. They are working on how we might extend rate relief in Northern Ireland, and it is important work. The Finance Minister will bring a paper on that in due course.

In planning for recovery, I have tried to re-energise the Economic Advisory Group that is part of my Department and was there under all of my predecessors. We are looking at a range of people for that — no names; no one has been appointed — including people whom I met when

I went to New York and Washington a few weeks ago. We are trying to establish a group to look not just at Northern Ireland businesses but at the wider global environment that Northern Ireland will be part of and has to compete in. We have our east coast economic advisory group, and we will try to bring it into that.

I am very happy to cooperate with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland; that is not a problem for me. There are very well identified cross-border bodies for that sort of work.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Does the Chair of the Committee wish to ask a brief supplementary question with a brief answer?

Dr Archibald: A brief supplementary, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Minister, thank you very much for that comprehensive answer. I just want to pick up briefly on the point about microbusinesses that will be able to access funding. You mentioned that they needed to be businesses that pay through PAYE. I would just highlight, as you said about start-ups, that self-employed people who have started up in the last year are unable to access the income support scheme. Perhaps they could be looked at as part of the hardship fund.

Mrs Dodds: They can be, if they are paid through their business, but, if they are self-employed, that is an entirely different category. If they are paid through their business, yes.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her statement. She will be aware that the Economy Committee heard from four chambers of commerce yesterday. A number of issues were raised, but they were thankful for the support that has been provided. One key issue is the job retention scheme and the furloughing of staff. Will the Minister assure them that we will look at, maybe, tapering that scheme as we go forward? Some businesses will open sooner rather than later, and they need support to ensure that they can keep people on the scheme.

Mrs Dodds: The job retention scheme is a national scheme. It is a reserved matter, and it is run by the Chancellor. This week, however, I have had two conversations with Minister Zahawi and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Alok Sharma, and, in those conversations, I have highlighted to them the need to avoid that cliff edge as the job retention scheme comes to an end. We cannot and should not expect the Government to continue to intervene in the way that they currently are, but nor can we have the cliff edge and, therefore, the mass redundancies that that might bring if the job retention scheme is suddenly cut at a particular point.

I am comforted — I think that that is the word — by some of the Chancellor's words, which recognise the issue. Certainly, however, from the conversations that I have had with local companies, I think it would be difficult to have a stark cut-off date for that scheme. I will continue to work with the Government to do that and make those representations at the highest level.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Again, I remind everyone that approximately 20 more members wish to ask questions and receive an answer. I will allow a quick

supplementary, and I ask you, Minister, to give a quick answer.

Mr Middleton: Time is of the essence, and businesses are under severe pressure. Will she ensure that that situation is addressed as soon as possible with the UK Government?

Mrs Dodds: I will. As I said, it is part of an ongoing conversation that I am having. Perhaps, the House would like to know that, as a devolved Administration, we have had possibly unprecedented access to UK Government Ministers over the period of the crisis. Just yesterday, I spoke to, I think, four of them. Earlier in the week, we had a teleconference between many of the major business organisations and representatives in Northern Ireland, Mr Zahawi and the Northern Ireland Office, all reiterating those points.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the importance of interconnected supply chains and support networks and talked about her focus on the future. Does her Department have more or fewer officials working on preparations for the ending of the transitional arrangements with the EU than it did, for example, six months ago? Will she assure the Assembly that her Department is fully prepared for the end of the transition period?

Mrs Dodds: I know that the member will understand that, over the last number of weeks, the Department has been incredibly focused on COVID-19 issues, on how we might preserve life and keep the economy in some shape of readiness for a return to work. A lot of my officials have been doing an enormous amount of work, and I want to publicly thank them for that. They have taken a lot of strain in relation to this issue. We continue to have a dedicated unit of officials who are working on EU exit matters. I was engaging with them on a number of issues this week, and we will continue to engage as this progresses.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): The member slipped two questions in there.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for her statement. I especially welcome the hardship grant and look forward to the details of that.

Around 19,000 companies have received the £10,000 grant to date, which is great, but thousands remain to get it. Will the Minister confirm either that those companies will receive that money before the 20 May deadline or that the deadline will be cancelled so that they can get some clarity?

Mrs Dodds: 20 May is not a deadline to pay; it is simply a deadline to close the schemes. The scheme for the £10,000 and the £25,000 grants will close on 20 May, and I encourage all members to make it widely known in their constituency that the schemes are still available and will be open for companies to apply to them.

Mr Stewart: I appreciate that, but many of those businesses are finding it difficult to see whether their application has been submitted or is being progressed because there is no dedicated helpline. Will the Minister look at the opportunity for an appeal mechanism for companies that have been turned down? On the back of the portal being launched last week, quite a lot of companies have been unable to avail themselves of the scheme. Even though they seem to meet all the criteria,

they have been told that they are ineligible and have no right of reply.

Mrs Dodds: I certainly will. It is not a scheme to exclude people; it is a scheme to include people. I want as many as possible. My stats tell me that just over 19,000 grants of £10,000 have been paid out, out of just over 21,000 applications.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement. One of my concerns about the economic crisis that we are enduring is the impact on young people. Young people were hit very hard as a result of the last crisis in 2008 and onwards, and now they are being hit hard here. We see projections of very high levels of unemployment. What engagement has the Minister had with stakeholders on that issue? Is she considering designing a specific intervention package such as the Future Jobs Fund?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for that very important question. It is hugely important that we are mindful that many of the people who were most impacted by the economic crisis following 2008, 2009 were young people who could not get employment, young graduates who could not get appropriate levels of employment and so on. That is absolutely at the top of my agenda.

I am in regular contact with our two universities and all the further education colleges; in fact, I was at the Southern Regional College's Lurgan campus this week, looking at how young people and staff are making visors and really helping out and being very proactive in doing so in the health emergency. I have made provision for them through the payment of their education maintenance allowances (EMA) and training allowances etc. We have continued to pay training providers for young people who are not in the colleges because we want to make sure that they are still in place and are able to continue to train and provide for young people.

I have spoken to and taken calls from university student representatives. I have proposed a further extension of the student hardship fund. That paper, again, awaits further consideration from the Executive.

Training is really important at this time. One of our companies has just completed an online academy for the financial services sector. I continuously promote work that will help us to upskill people — young, not so young and everybody else — and get them back into work after this time. This week, we were exploring more online academies for young people to try to make sure that they have the right skills to get back into the workplace at the right time.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her detailed response. It is important that a package is put together, similar to that put together in 2008-09 for young people.

Is the Minister prepared to explore the lifting of the cap for Northern Ireland students? We have already seen forecasts that the number of international students will drop. There is a likelihood that students from Northern Ireland will want to study locally. Can we consider how to support our universities on that?

Mrs Dodds: That is another really important issue. In Northern Ireland, we have two universities that we can be very proud of. Just last weekend, the universities package came out from the Minister and the Secretary of State nationally. As I said in my press statement, I have some reservations about that package. There are admissions

criteria that are possibly not that advantageous to universities in Northern Ireland.

We need to ensure that our universities have really good access to research funding, so that we can provide the good, qualitative research that not only enhances university and academic life but drives our economy. Many companies come to Northern Ireland because of that, so I have been doing work around that. Members will be interested to know that I had a long conversation with Minister Donelan and Minister Solloway yesterday, who have education responsibilities, around how Northern Ireland can be part of all of those research funds and, in particular, have access to research funding, going forward.

I have had conversations with both universities around admissions and around the importance of international students in bringing them much-needed financial resources, so that has been on our agenda as well. The lifting of the cap is a huge issue for Northern Ireland, and we would need to look at it in the context of an overall strategic review of university funding and university places. I see it not as a short-term issue but as a much longer-term issue in the strategic review.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her efforts to date in supporting the local economy through this terrible crisis. In relation to grant funding — something that, I think, a lot of members have been very active on recently — the issue that comes up regularly is support for multiple sites or multiple units of locally owned businesses in Northern Ireland. Can we get some indication of the possibility of extending the £10,000 grant or the £25,000 grant to support multiple units? I understand that, in Scotland, there is an incremental scheme, going first of all on full payment and then —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked his question. He may get a supplementary.

Mr Dunne: — second —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Minister.

Mr Dunne: — and also in England.

Mrs Dodds: Of course, I am very alive to the issue of one business having multiple sites, but the decision was taken by the Executive, in order to get money to as many businesses as possible, that it would be one grant per business, as opposed to one grant per outlet. However, it is, of course, an issue that, should further funding become available, we can always consider.

Mr Dunne: Following on in relation to the grants and the grant that was announced last week, can we get some further clarification of the £10,000 grant that is for sub-rented properties? There seems to be a lot of difficulty for people in getting access to it, because the criteria are too complex. The NAV limit is, I believe, less than £1,590, which is not much good to most people out there. I ask that that be reviewed if possible, please.

Mrs Dodds: I can write to the member specifically on that issue. He is right that it is a more complex issue. Last week, we put an additional page on the portal so that businesses that rent their properties from a landlord could access the funding much more easily, as opposed to the landlord in any way getting the £10,000. It is about trying to get money to real businesses in real time and as promptly as possible.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her statement. I was wondering if she could confirm whether the £10,000 grant scheme could be extended to engineering and manufacturing firms that currently do not qualify because of their NAV.

Mrs Dodds: The £10,000 grant scheme has been extended to businesses that currently benefit from industrial derating, so, in a way, there has been a major extension of the scheme. We think that that brings about 2,500 to 3,000 more businesses into the scheme, so it has already been extended. I have no hesitation in saying that we have already done work to identify other cohorts of businesses that could benefit from support, were more money to become available, but it will be around the amount of money that the Executive make available for the project.

As we speak, around £410 million for that type of support has been brought forward. While the scheme has been very valuable to businesses, we must look at what businesses will need in order to recover and at the support that we will need to help the economy recover and get businesses back on their feet. My conversations at the tourism steering group meeting yesterday would indicate that there is a lot of work to be done on that.

Ms Dillon: I appreciate the fact that the scheme was extended to manufacturing businesses that qualify for industrial derating. That has certainly been helpful to me in my constituency of Mid Ulster. However, I ask that the Minister look at extending the scheme to businesses that are small in nature but have a larger NAV due to the nature of their business. There is a large engineering industry in Mid Ulster in particular. We have the largest number of VAT-registered businesses outside Belfast city. Those are indigenous businesses. They are not going anywhere. They are not global companies or foreign direct investment but businesses that grew during times that were very difficult, so —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): The member has asked her question.

Ms Dillon: — we need that west of the Bann.

Mrs Dodds: Those are businesses that probably fall into the £15,000 to £51,000 category. Yes, we have done work to identify those businesses, and, if money were to become available, they would potentially come under a second tier of the hardship fund that we could bring forward relatively easily.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her statement. My question relates to tourism, on which you spoke briefly. Can you give us an update on what support you will give the industry across Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: It is really hard to quantify the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry. I keep saying this, and I sometimes have to remind myself: just a few short weeks ago, I was in New York and Washington DC talking to tour operators. We were talking about expanding our tourism offering and expanding the Northern Ireland tourism market in North America. Today, we have no connecting flights anywhere on the island to that destination. The impact of people not coming to Northern Ireland from the Far East for particular reasons, be it 'Game of Thrones' or whatever, has been devastating. Our cruise industry through Belfast harbour has been devastated as well.

At home, many small local businesses have been equally devastated. Many of those businesses in the tourism sector will therefore have been able to avail themselves of the £10,000 grant. The £25,000 grant is specifically directed at the tourism sector, so, no matter what element of the tourism sector you are part of, if your NAV falls within the aforementioned limits, you can apply for that grant, because it is specifically directed at you. I know that some of the work that the Finance Minister has been doing on rates extension applies specifically to the tourism industry. If we are to get real and meaningful help to some of the bigger operators who have large investments in tourism in Northern Ireland, that is one of the ways in which we can do so.

We also have set up a tourism steering group. That is quite a wide-ranging body, encompassing a lot of the tourism and hospitality industry. Yesterday, I chaired the first of its small working group meetings. It will be run for us by Tourism NI, with John McGrillen, its chief executive, taking it forward. It will identify the supports that will be needed for us to take tourism back to where it needs to be. It is time to rebuild it. Tourism is a hugely important industry for Northern Ireland. It provides 65,000 jobs, and, last year, it brought £1 billion into the economy.

Mr Beggs: I call Keith Buchanan for a supplementary. We need concise questions and answers.

Mr K Buchanan: There are not many caravan parks in mid-Ulster, as I am sure you are aware, but there are some around the north coast that fall outside the rateable value of £51,000 and, therefore, get no support. Has the Minister been in communication with that caravanning sector about it getting additional support based on the fact that their rateable value is above £51,000?

Mrs Dodds: I have had numerous conversations with some of the owners. Caravan parks are, essentially, private businesses, and they will fall into that tourism and hospitality sector, so, if there is further targeted rates relief, they will fall into that as well.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for the statement. On the matter of some businesses reopening and a phased return to work, will the Minister issue sector-specific guidance to businesses that are client-facing such as dentists, hairdressers and the taxi industry so that, when they return, they can operate safely?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for a very pertinent and topical question. Over the past two weeks, I and my Department have been working with the BEIS Department in London on working-safer plans so that, when the restrictions are lifted and we are ready to return, there will be plans in place for various sectors in that working-safer environment. Of course, as they are published nationally, we will bring those back to Northern Ireland and look at them in the context in which we operate here. So, yes, it is very, very much on my mind, and it is something that my Department's officials have been working on. It is work that we continue to do in preparation for restarting, rebooting and recovering this economy.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Following on from some of the things that she said in her statement, we welcome all the grants and all the support, but the taxi industry is one of the industries that has been crying out for support. It feels that it is being hit hard. Is there anything in the hardship fund or other grants that the

Minister can outline today that would support the taxi industry?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. Yes, I recognise that. It is very difficult for industries such as taxiing in the current environment. If employees work for a small company and are paid through a PAYE scheme, the hardship grant will be applicable to them and they will be able to apply for it. However, each one will have to be assessed against the criteria to see whether they are eligible or not.

Mr O'Toole: Thanks to the Minister for coming and giving us an update today. I appreciate everything that she said about the road to recovery and the importance of engaging with business in various sectors for that recovery. She specifically mentioned the durability of supply chains, and she specifically mentioned hauliers. In her engagement with various business groups, have any of them indicated to her that they would prefer the UK to crash out of the transition period without a deal over an extension to that transition period?

Mrs Dodds: My conversation with hauliers at this particular time, for the member's information, has been consistently around the need to ensure safe supply chains for Northern Ireland to secure vital supplies of food and medicine and other supply chain imperatives. That has been my most recent conversation.

This week and, in fact, tomorrow, I will again be discussing with the Department for Transport in London a package for hauliers. We have been successful in doing a lot of work on trying to stabilise airports and airlines. We have worked quite hard around the ferries issue, and the outstanding bit of the jigsaw puzzle is the issue around hauliers. I assure the member that, at this time, the fact that they are operating at a huge loss is uppermost in their minds.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I remind members that this is the COVID-19 Ad Hoc Committee.

Mr Butler: Minister, thank you for your words today and for your efforts and those of your Department and, indeed, the entire Executive in trying to help local businesses. You stated that businesses have adapted once more, demonstrating agility and resilience in the face of adversity. They have stepped up to the challenge by doing what is necessary. We are now four to five weeks post-application for financial assistance to businesses. Can the Minister outline any thoughts or actions that her Department has had in adapting and demonstrating that same agility to refine and improve the processing system, to make it much more informative and live and to give real-time information to the many thousands of businesses that have not yet received financial assistance?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for his question, and I also thank the House in general for the support that is forthcoming. These are difficult days and many of my officials have been working very hard on these issues.

Many of the schemes have been implemented very quickly. The essence of our mission was to get money to businesses as quickly as we could. We may not have been as informative as we could have been — I accept that — and perhaps we can remedy that. It would be useful to share with members some of the stats around where we are with the economy, so that they will know the steep path that we need to climb to economic recovery, and that is hugely important.

The Northern Ireland Business Info website has a wealth of information on all of the help that is available. Invest NI has been tasked with making sure that that is up-to-date, and it has also been conducting webinars with businesses encountering difficulties to explain the various schemes and to try and get them up and running. I have been absolutely clear and upfront with the House about the number of grants applied for and paid, the dates when those grants will end, and how we go forward.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I call Robbie Butler for a brief supplementary.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, and thank you for saying that you would take a look at that. What plans have you made to support those companies with a Net Annual Value (NAV) of over £50,000, or more than 15 employees, that at this point have been excluded from all government assistance?

Mrs Dodds: Again, and as I have said to the House many times, I think that for many of those large companies, extending rates relief, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sector, but of course those companies have also benefited from the national job retention scheme, where many of them will have workers furloughed. Some of our statistics show that many companies have 70% to 80% of their workforce furloughed through those schemes.

Yesterday, I spoke to some of our leading banking institutions and I asked them how some of the loan schemes from Government were going. The original coronavirus business interruption loan scheme (CBILS) had quite significant difficulties, but I am assured that, given the modifications that were made by the Chancellor, much more money is going back out into the business community very quickly. One of the banking institutions that I talked to yesterday, had received, since Monday, 1,100 applications for the bounce back loan, the loan for small and medium-sized enterprises. Of those, 600 were approved by Wednesday and, of course, they are 100% guaranteed by Government, with no interest for a year. Many of our businesses are benefiting in different ways.

Mr Givan: Thank you Minister for coming to the Assembly today. In terms of the planning for restarting the economy and businesses knowing when they can start to engage again in their activity, some businesses that are allowed to do so by the regulations are already reopening. Does the Minister agree that we need to provide information, as soon as possible, to business owners to facilitate that decision-making processes?

Mrs Dodds: Yes, is the short answer. If I am permitted a longer answer, yes of course we do. As I have already referenced, I have been working with BEIS in London around safer work spaces. In Northern Ireland we are a little bit ahead of the curve, and we already have some guidance from the engagement forum chaired by the Labour Relations Agency, which brings together trade unions and businesses to set out good, practical advice and guidance on how to work safely.

The Health and Safety Executive and the Public Health Agency have also continued to work with businesses to advise them and enable them to get back to work and to work safely, particularly within the social distancing guidelines. It is worth using this platform to say to those to employers who are going back to work that it is imperative

that the workplace is safe and that social-distancing guidelines are met and kept.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Minister, for that response. You indicated that the financial scheme is being administered through the rate system, and I appreciate and understand why that was the case at the start, which was to allow people to get money out. But there are businesses that are falling through the cracks because that scheme is being used. Can the Minister assure those businesses that there will be support for them when they are identified as legitimate businesses that are operating in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: I of course want to support legitimate businesses operating in Northern Ireland. That is a fundamental for me. As I said before, there are many and varied businesses in the Northern Ireland business community. We used the rates scheme because identifying those businesses and getting money out to them etc was easier. We have extended those schemes in certain ways, and next week we will launch a hardship scheme as well. My Department is continuously working to identify other cohorts of businesses, but, as you will realise, we live in an environment where we have a limited number of financial resources, and I will continue to make the case to the Executive for continued support for many of those businesses.

Ms C Kelly: Does the Minister agree that her Department must prioritise rural broadband improvements in order to ensure that workers can work from home in these unprecedented times?

Mrs Dodds: I am absolutely passionate about ensuring that broadband is brought up to speed in Northern Ireland. Just a few weeks ago, we got confirmation that another tranche of the confidence and supply money would be made available to the Executive to use for Project Stratum. The good news is that we now have two bids in for that project. I have no part in this, obviously, but those bids will be assessed, and if there is someone who is suitable, we hope that we will award a contract in the reasonably near future — certainly, by September we will get to contract-award point. It will then take some time for assessments and for it to go out to delivery on the ground. This is a very important project for Northern Ireland.

One of the things that COVID-19 has taught us is that we will, potentially, do business differently to how we have done it before. Many of us, even old technophobes like me, have become proficient in Zoom and Microsoft Teams and all sorts of things that we never thought we would use. We will not do business in the same way again. Connectivity will be key.

Ms C Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware of the campaign advocating for an all-Ireland right to connectivity. That campaign calls on internet providers to open up all hotspots cost free and to waive the prohibitive charges for households that are unable to access a decent broadband connection. Will the Minister support that campaign?

Mrs Dodds: I do not have the details of that particular campaign, but it, clearly, is out there and is very well known. I will write to the member shortly outlining all the different schemes that we have to try to improve rural broadband connectivity in the medium to short term. I will write with details of all those schemes — it is quite an impressive list.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you Minister for coming to the Chamber. I declare an interest at the outset as my husband stood down from Northern Ireland Screen's board in the last year. I note that today, the chief executive has issued a statement that set out the impact on that sector in stark terms. What will your Department do to support them now and in the future?

Mrs Dodds: I have had conversations with the chair and chief executive of Northern Ireland Screen. They recently put proposals to the Department for some re-profiling of their budget in order to go out and help some of the independent people who work in the sector and others to help young people with digital improvements that they can make to their skills. We are working with Northern Ireland Screen. That is where their latest proposal is, and we will look on that favourably.

The TV and film industry brings an enormous amount to Northern Ireland not just in money into the economy but in international renown. Many of us have followed the series that have been made in Northern Ireland. I want to see that capacity preserved, and I want to see Northern Ireland, once again, producing really quality programmes for us all to enjoy.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I call Paula Bradshaw for a supplementary.

Ms Bradshaw: No, thank you. I am satisfied with the answer.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for coming to the Committee to give that statement. The Minister stated that it is important to "keep the lights on". Will the Minister provide an update on the troubling news in Northern Ireland Electricity Networks that they are in negotiations with staff and unions to put them onto a four-day week with a 20% reduction in pay? Will the Minister also give an update on the ongoing troublesome issue with the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) and its governance and independence?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for his continued interest in those issues. You are right around the issue of a reduction to a four-day week. In Northern Ireland, the current amount of electricity that we use is reduced by about 20% because manufacturing is not operating at its usual level. That is a difficulty and may well prove a difficulty, as the member knows because of his interest in the area, for the price of electricity as we go forward. That is something for us all to be very concerned about.

Of course, I am concerned about any reduction in workers' salaries, wages or terms and conditions of employment. I understand that this is still a matter of negotiation with the unions, and it is something that I do not want to be specific about.

I have been monitoring the SONI issue very closely. I want to see an independent system in Northern Ireland. I continue to liaise with the Utility Regulator in that and in the work that she is doing. It is something that I will keep a consistent eye on and something that is important to the governance of the energy market, going forward.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked his two questions. I call John O'Dowd.

Mr O'Dowd: There is an important section of our society that is missing from your statement, Minister: students

and the support for them, moving forward. I note from comments by your officials at last week's Committee for the Economy meeting that you are re-profiling your business plan. You noted at the start of your statement that things had not gone the way you would have hoped, so are there savings to be identified in your Department. If there are, will you direct some of them towards the student hardship fund?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for his continued interest in the issue. As I outlined to our colleague, I have been taking a strong interest in the issues of students, not just their education but their welfare while they are at university. As with all Departments, we will look to where we can make savings, to what we can re-profile and to how we can make the best of where we are. That is in terms of continuing mitigations but also in support and recovery mode. That work is ongoing and will come to fruition with the June monitoring round, which is not that far off. However, in the meantime, I thought that it was prudent that I alert Executive colleagues to the issue. I have sent a paper to the Executive that outlines that, if we had another £2.5 million, that would double the support that we give to the student hardship fund and would bring us into line with Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom. So far, that bid has not been successful, but I assure the member that I will continue to press it.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the fact that the matter is still on the Minister's radar and, hopefully, will be dealt with. In relation to another matter in the Minister's statement — the Economic Advisory Group — will the Minister commit to placing a member of the trade union movement on that group? Representatives of workers will be as important as any other voice in rejuvenating our economy.

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely agree that we always need to work with our social partners and trade unions in our community. As yet, the Economic Advisory Group has not been formed. I do not have a list of members for it at this minute in time. However, my vision for it is a group of people who are world leaders in their sector and can tell us how to drive those sectors forward. We have a world-leading, cutting-edge cybersecurity sector in Northern Ireland. I want the advice, guidance and so on from people who can really drive those sectors forward. They will make the difference in providing not just more jobs but better jobs for Northern Ireland, which will keep young graduates in work and keep our economy turning over. That is my vision for it, but I do not want it to be just Northern Ireland-specific; I want it to look at the more global pattern. That is why, when I was in the States in March, we re-established the east coast advisory council, which is made up of key businessmen who are part of the Northern Ireland diaspora. They have done well in the United States and are keen to help economic development at home. That is my vision for the Economic Advisory Group. I want us to use its expertise and help us build the leading-edge businesses that will drive the economy forward. That will feed into some important work that we have to do before the end of the mandate to provide a good economic strategy to drive the Northern Ireland economy for the future.

Mr McGrath: Many self-employed businesspeople will have furloughed their staff and paid their bills, but, because there is no business, they are not getting an income themselves. Can the Minister detail any conversations that she has had with London to get

assurances that that scheme will pay out soon? Those people have gone for weeks and weeks without any money, and they are desperate.

Mrs Dodds: That is something that I bring up regularly in my conversations with BEIS Ministers and, indeed, in some wider telephone calls with the Chancellor. There is a particular issue that some of those people have been at the back end of the queue. In fairness, we have to admit that the job retention scheme is an absolutely massive undertaking for HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Some firms who applied to it have told me that they literally had the money in their bank account six days later, which is an absolutely phenomenal achievement. I now understand that HMRC is writing out to self-employed people who are eligible for the scheme and that it is well under way. Be assured that it is something that I am cognisant of and will continue to make representation about.

Mr McGrath: Given the destructive impact of COVID-19 on those businesses, does the Minister agree that it will place an impossible burden on them if we crash out of the EU with no deal?

Mrs Dodds: Most businesses in Northern Ireland are fearful for the future. They worry about the impact of COVID-19 and about where the market will be as they try to re-establish and recover, and that goes for all sectors of the economy. At this moment in time, there are ongoing negotiations with the European Union. My understanding is that, last week, the Specialised Committee met and discussed some of the issues that were particular to Northern Ireland and those negotiations are ongoing. It is way too premature to talk of anything else.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for coming here to make a statement. I note that you have stated that the top priority is still the protection of life. In light of that, can the Minister provide any clarity on what is deemed by the Executive to be a priority sector for the purposes of construction, as stated on the list of priority business sectors that was published by the Department for the Economy on 20 April?

Mrs Dodds: It is very simple. The most important thing that the Executive have tried to do is to save life and protect people from the impact of COVID-19. It has been devastating, and there are many families in Northern Ireland who have felt the pain of COVID-19. I am clear that, whatever the sector, if that sector is working, if that firm is working, employers have a duty to employees to maintain a safe working environment. We have published advice on the website about that safe working environment. If there are still questions from employers about what that looks like, the Public Health Agency and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) will absolutely engage with those employers in order to make sure that they have a safe working environment. That is an absolute imperative. It is worth noting that many of our employers, particularly in the food industry, have gone to enormous lengths and a lot of expense to ensure that they have provided a safe working environment not just in physical measures but in reorientating shifts, clock-ons and canteen arrangements in their factory et cetera. That will become the new normal. It will be things that we will have to do for a significant time to come, and we all need to be cognisant of that.

Miss Woods: Can the Minister clarify how the construction industry is supposed to adequately socially distance while working on a building site? If that cannot be achieved,

where possible, or to the best of their ability, as it is in the guidance, can the Minister confirm that it means that workers should not be there, given the health risks?

Mrs Dodds: As I have said to the Member, the guidance is there to help people understand what they must do. There will be more specific guidance that can be obtained by contacting the Health and Safety Executive, and all employers should attend to that.

Mr Allister: The Minister in her statement said:

“we need to be decisive in our policy choices”.

When will we see that decisiveness in the reopening of our economy? She said that our economy was in the “deep freeze”: is it not the case that, if we go on as we are much longer, everything in the freezer will be lost?

Mrs Dodds: I, of course, share the Member’s concern for the economy. I have done everything I can to get help out to businesses with the funds that have been available to me. There will be £410 million in support funds available for businesses. An enormous amount of work has gone into cooperating with national Government over the job retention schemes, the self-employed schemes and the loan schemes that are available to support businesses. All of those schemes have been done with a speed of intervention that is, probably, unheard-of for government sources. However, it is absolutely imperative that we are led by the science and the medical experts who tell us about the need to save life in Northern Ireland. I am keen to see the economy restart. I have already said that, where people can work safely within the guidelines and regulations, they should do so. I will continue my work of preparation for rebooting and recovering the economy.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister accept that, as and when, hopefully sooner rather than later, we reopen the economy, that must be in tandem with reopening our schools, so as to provide for working parents?

Mrs Dodds: I accept that the reopening of schools has an impact on parents’ availability for the economy. Again, we must be led by what is best for the health of people in Northern Ireland. The Executive and the Education Minister will take the view on when schools should open.

Mr Carroll: The Minister is aware, no doubt, that Queen’s University reports potential losses of up to £80 million, and Ulster University (UU) up to £64 million, over three years. At the Economy Committee last week, the vice chancellors of both Queen’s and UU forecast a significant loss of income for their institutions as a result of the coronavirus crisis. Will the Minister confirm that a tuition fee increase will not be an option considered to plug this gap?

Mrs Dodds: As I indicated in response to an earlier question, on the lifting of the cap on student numbers, any of those issues will be part of a much wider and more long-term review of how higher education is funded in Northern Ireland. I am on record as saying that I do not believe students should be first in line to be targeted in order to provide funding for universities. Those are long-term issues that we will take forward.

However, in the short-term, I had significant conversations, yesterday, with the Minister in London responsible for universities, research and innovation, and with the universities themselves, as to the need for a stabilisation

package, potentially later this year, as they see how things work out.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her reply. I agree with her that we need to take a longer-term view but, in my view, that is one that should not punish or penalise students. She said in a previous answer that the Government cannot intervene in the way that it has done. In relation to this crisis, we need more Government intervention, especially around education and universities.

Does the Minister agree with me that students should not be penalised, especially as they have gone over and beyond, and have been very cooperative, in abiding by the social-distancing measures? They should not be punished in the future by having barriers placed in front of them with regard to higher education, including higher tuition fees.

Mrs Dodds: I have said this to the member before. I was the first in my family to go to university, and I am absolutely keen that we dismantle barriers to further and higher education provision. Education opens doors and breaks down barriers. I am keen that all members of our society benefit from it.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I ask any member present who has not asked a question and wishes to do so, to rise from their chair?

Mr Wells: Will the Minister join with me in congratulating the staff of HMRC, who have been able to pay the salaries of over five million people within a week of the applications being lodged, and to express the thanks of many of my constituents and businesses for that? I ask her to contact her colleagues in the Treasury to ensure that the self-employed scheme is as effectively administered as the employed scheme.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for his request. I will of course pass on that message. As I said before today, it is quite phenomenal that so many have been paid. On the first day of the scheme, I think that they received 68,000 applications. Many of the Northern Ireland firms who have applied for the scheme report to me that they were paid within six days of inputting their details into the portal. That is quite a phenomenal achievement, as well as a phenomenal in intervention in the economy. I look forward to the self-employed scheme being rolled out in a similar and efficient manner. I will, of course, pass on the member’s acknowledgement.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I call Jim Wells for a supplementary question, if he wishes to ask one.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member will realise that the £10,000 grant scheme was effectively administered by Land and Property Services. I pay public tribute to Tony Loughran who was the link officer between MLAs and the Department of Finance in this case. Will the Minister consider appointing someone of similar status to liaise with MLAs when dealing with the £25,000 scheme?

Mrs Dodds: I have had a number of enquiries in relation to the £25,000 scheme. Officials in my Department will always be happy to liaise with members directly on the issue.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I thank members and the Minister for their cooperation. That concludes questions to the Minister on this occasion.

Item 3 on the agenda is the time, date and place of our next meeting. We have received confirmation from the Justice Minister that she wishes to make her deferred statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at a meeting to be held on Thursday 14 May. Unless otherwise notified about an earlier meeting, that will be the next time that the Ad Hoc Committee will sit. Written notification confirming the time will be issued to members in due course in the usual way.

I remind members that, in the meantime, a plenary sitting of the Assembly is scheduled to take place on Tuesday 12 May and that Ministers may continue to make oral statements to the Assembly on sitting days. As you will be aware, there does not need to be considerable notice for that, so please watch out as there may be some important statements being made.

That concludes today's meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

14 May 2020

Ministerial Statement: Health

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jim Allister
Ms Sinéad Bradley
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Alan Chambers
Ms Linda Dillon
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Paul Givan
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr Robin Swann
Mr Jim Wells
Miss Rachel Woods

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Agenda item 3 is a statement from the Minister of Health. The Speaker received notification on 7 May that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in your tabled pack at page 3.

I welcome the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, to the meeting. I invite the Minister to make his statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for them to ask questions.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for accepting my request to address the Committee here again today. I welcome the opportunity and am keen to ensure openness, transparency and clear communication with you as elected representatives and with those whom you represent on the management of the ongoing emergency.

I assure you that my Department is doing all that it can, along with the support of those in the whole health and social care system and with my Executive colleagues, to

manage the impact of COVID-19 and to mitigate its worst effects. In that, those battling every day with the disease and I are reliant on the continued goodwill and cooperation of the public, in seeking to protect each other from the spread of the disease and to protect the capacity of our front-line services.

You will have seen the changes made to the regulations that have come into effect in England in recent days, and you will have seen the Executive's plan for how Northern Ireland transitions into a new phase of recovery. Let me state once more that our approach to the easing of restrictions will be guided by science and not by the calendar. In these challenging times, the only thing that we can say with certainty is that moving too swiftly to ease certain restrictions risks throwing away the progress that we have all united to achieve in recent weeks. I would like nothing more than to be able to tell everyone that everything will be all right and that the worst is all behind us. We have achieved much in recent weeks. I am proud of the response of our health and social care workers, in particular, and a better place is in sight.

I wish to give members an update today on the recent developments with regard to surge planning and the initial work being undertaken by my Department with regard to recovery.

As part of the preparations for the first wave, our priority was to ensure that the health and care system had sufficient capacity to deal with the rising numbers of COVID-19 patients. During March and April, critical care units across Northern Ireland implemented the regional critical care surge plan, providing the capability for the system to significantly increase critical care capacity. With the number of COVID-19 patients requiring critical care maintaining a gradual downward trend, my Department has taken the decision to reduce the escalation level for critical care to "low surge".

As members will be aware, the Belfast City Hospital tower block was designated Northern Ireland's Nightingale hospital for the first wave. Due mainly to the commitment of Health and Social Care (HSC) staff and the positive impact of social distancing, the Nightingale has not been required to deliver its full capacity and will be stood down. That is good news. It also allows for the reintroduction of urgent surgery and a range of other key services to be delivered from the tower block. I assure members that the

system will retain sufficient additional beds to continue to deliver care for COVID-19-positive patients in the coming months. The Nightingale will continue to be part of the region's flexible plan to re-escalate, if modelling suggests further waves.

Reducing the escalation level will ensure that the HSC has the capability to release and redeploy some capacity to enable the resumption of urgent surgery and treatment. I recognise the severe impact that COVID-19 has had on a range of key services, including essential services such as cancer screening and treatments. The pandemic has similarly thrown our already horrendous waiting times into further turmoil. That is why I have already tasked officials to urgently develop a comprehensive recovery plan.

I must warn the House that, whilst the immediate impact of COVID has been awful, the long-term impact will also be terrible. It will require serious efforts and serious financial commitment to try to fix some of the damage that has been done. However, when it comes to restarting key services, I really hope and expect that the Assembly and the Executive will not be found lacking in either. I am also keen that we consider the extent to which innovation and new delivery models developed during the emergency response can be incorporated as we resume and develop health and social care services. It is critically important to recognise that it will not be a return to business as usual. COVID-19 will be with us for some time.

It must be remembered that, since I last addressed the Committee, two weeks ago, more of our citizens have lost their life to this terrible disease. As of today, the total number of fatalities across all sectors stands at 454. I reassure Members that that figure includes deaths not only in hospitals but in care homes, at home and in community settings. There is, understandably, significant focus on the reporting of all deaths but especially those in our care homes. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) reports weekly figures with regard to the number of deaths in nursing and residential care homes. The latest figures, when compared with the same period during 2018 and 2019, indicate that the number of deaths is falling across the sector, with spikes reported around 21 and 27 April 2020. The official source of information in relation to deaths is, however, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). Whilst recognising the absolute need for data to be accurate, I want it to be timely. That is why, earlier this week, I wrote to NISRA asking them to consider moving beyond their current weekly bulletin on deaths to publication twice a week or more. This morning, I received a response from NISRA declining that request. However, it is something that I want to pursue.

Every life lost too early is a tragedy. There has been much focus on statistics and percentages. I know that I do not need to remind anyone in the House that behind every figure is someone who was loved and is now deeply missed. It is right to recognise that, were it not for the heroic work of our health and social care workers and the tremendous sacrifices made by everyone across Northern Ireland, the number of deaths that we would face would be many times worse. That is of no consolation to those who have been bereaved and have not been able to mourn their loved ones as they would choose. Once again, I offer my deepest condolences to their friends and families.

I will now take some time to update the Committee on the latest developments in the approach that I have adopted

to deal with the emergency and to outline some of the significant actions that have been key to my response.

Testing continues to be a vital tool in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of this morning, the total number of individual tests processed by our local HSC labs stands at 43,835. That is almost a further 11,500 tests that have been carried out locally as part of the national testing programme. As of today, we have tested 13,025 healthcare workers. That is a central reason why we have such a low staff absence rate. The latest figures from Monday show that there were 304 staff off across the trusts due to COVID-19, with a further 2,042 absent due to self-isolation. Many of them will be shielding. Combined, that is 3.2% of the entire workforce, a workforce that is working so courageously on the front line.

Through our work with key stakeholders and delivery partners across the HSC system, local universities and industry, we plan to further increase our testing capacity significantly. The expansion is being overseen by the Department's expert advisory group on testing and is delivered in close collaboration with our expert virology team. As a priority, we are further expanding our testing programme in care homes. Testing is being expanded on a phased basis, and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service now provides a mobile testing service to assist care home staff and trust teams who support care homes. That expansion is in addition to the testing being undertaken in homes where there is an outbreak or a cluster of infections, when all staff and residents are tested.

On the significant issue of support for care homes, I will take a few moments to update Members on the wide range of measures being deployed in Northern Ireland to protect care home residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of homes with a confirmed outbreak stands at 75, with a further 32 suspected. However, let me also highlight that there are now 27 closed outbreaks. Whilst it is not easy, it is possible, through the heroic efforts of homes, the residents, their carers and cleaners, to get COVID out of the homes.

I also remind members that, for every home with either a confirmed or suspected outbreak, there are three that do not have one. Whilst I am loath to draw comparisons, that compares much more favourably with other parts of these islands. Nevertheless, there is no doubt at all that care homes have been seriously impacted by the disease. Our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland and across the UK have had similarly distressing experiences, and I want to emphasise that extensive support has been and continues to be provided to the care home sector.

The Department, the board, the PHA, the trusts and the RQIA are all playing their part, and we are constantly seeking ways to enhance and intensify that support. We moved before other parts of the UK to increase testing in care homes. Figures from the RQIA yesterday demonstrated that 3,627 residents have been tested for COVID-19, which represents over a quarter of the total population of care homes in Northern Ireland. At the same time, 3,915 care home staff have also been tested. In addition to a significant expansion of testing for care home residents and staff, which will be informed by the advice of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and the Department's strategic intelligence group, up to 40 HSC nurses are being deployed to support testing in care

homes and will be integrated into the support teams that are in place.

I have also agreed that testing will be extended into supported living, and that work is now under way. I am ensuring that the trusts are strengthening the hospital-to-community outreach teams who deliver specialist care and support to older people in care homes and in their own homes. Considerable support has also been provided to the care sector through the provision of free-of-charge staffing time to care providers and by making available to care home staff a range of training materials and courses on topics such as practical nursing skills, the management of acutely ill patients and infection control. In addition, a service support team has been set up by the RQIA to allow experienced inspectors with backgrounds in nursing and social work to provide direct advice to care homes and domiciliary care providers; over 1,000 contacts to that team have been made to date.

The pandemic has highlighted, again, the importance of the work that is undertaken day and daily in social care. As such, I am finalising a paper for the Executive that charts a way ahead for the sector, including, as an immediate priority, additional support for staff. However, in addition to those immediate actions, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to reflect and plan for the frailty and clinical acuity of residents in homes.

There has been a significant shift in the complexity of care that has been provided over recent years. The staffing profile that is needed to provide the best care has also changed, with requirements for more registered nurses and a multi-disciplinary team. Those residents who would have been in hospital five years ago because of multiple morbidities or who were receiving palliative or end-of-life care for many long-term conditions are now often cared for in nursing and residential homes. Residential homes have now become what used to be nursing homes.

As I said in my press statement yesterday, the social care sector has been struggling for years and, as a whole, is not fit for purpose. The structural reasons for that are well documented and are no fault of the staff. Reforming social care remains one of the most difficult long-term challenges facing modern-day government. I am, therefore, proposing to move ahead with reform and investment plans, subject to the necessary financial support being provided by the Executive. The pandemic has also drawn attention to the frailty of the care home sector, which has needed so much support to maintain services safely. If we are to be better prepared for the future, we will need to address the systemic staffing challenges that are faced by the sector.

As an early priority, I want to see training and terms and conditions for care home staff being standardised and improved. We will have to ensure that the return on that investment will be for the benefit of staff and residents and not for the profit margins of the operators. That means a decent wage, increasing sick leave pay and providing a career pathway and training to do the job safely and well. I accept that many providers already provide that, but, in future, we must ensure that all do.

If I may diverge for a moment, it will not surprise the House to learn that I am not overly familiar with Gaelic games, but the phrase “hurlers from the ditch” has been stuck in my mind of late. It refers to those who are sniping from the sidelines and staying on the sidelines. We have

had plenty of “hurlers from the ditch” of late. Experts and self-appointed experts with nothing but criticism to offer. The truth is that there are no easy answers — no magic solutions. The situation that we are dealing with is unprecedented, very tough and extremely complicated. Often, the best that we can do is find the least worst option. Keeping the lockdown in place is taking a huge toll, but relaxing it too widely and too early would be catastrophic. Even the wisdom of Solomon would be stretched.

Moving on, I am pleased to be able to update the Committee that there is a real, coordinated effort to support the national personal protective equipment (PPE) supply, and the UK four nations mutual aid arrangement is helping to get PPE to where it is needed. Most recently, we shared approximately 1.8 million items of personal protective equipment with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and have received over six million individual items of personal protective equipment from the Department of Health and Social Care, England and Wales, as a result of the mutual aid arrangements. The Business Services Organisation (BSO) continues to distribute significant PPE supplies to all five HSC trusts and, indeed, just last week, BSO reported that it had distributed over 6.8 million items of PPE across the trusts.

Members may be aware of recent advice from DHSC to withdraw some Tiger eye-protection medical products due to issues with their fit. That matter was addressed swiftly, with all trusts notified to cease supply, and a recall of any items is under way. Thankfully, this has not had a significant impact on supply locally, as there are adequate face visors in stock or on order to meet demand at current levels. I can also advise members that we are working to build up our PPE stockpile for the post-surge period and any possible second wave. We will pursue every feasible route locally and internationally to do this.

A further development in my approach to combating this disease is the preparation of a test, trace, isolate, support strategy, which will set out the public health approach to minimising COVID-19 transmission in the community in Northern Ireland. My Department is progressing this work, which is designed to break the chain of transmission of the virus by identifying people with COVID-19 — known as cases — tracing people who have been in close contact with them — known as contacts — and supporting those people to self-isolate so that, if they have the disease, they are less likely to transmit it to others. The Chief Medical Officer has established a strategic oversight board for that work, and support from the public will be absolutely critical to its success. I appreciate that some people may have concerns about what that might mean for their privacy, but I can assure members that participation will be voluntary, and people will have full control over the information that they choose to disclose.

One of the key elements of that work is the development of a Northern Ireland contact-tracing service. Over recent weeks, the Public Health Agency has carried out a pilot to test our approach, and a training programme has been developed. We are also working to ensure that there is a clear pathway for all citizens that joins up a range of elements of the system, including the COVID-19 symptom tracker, 111 helpline, GP and HSC services, testing, results and the contact-tracing service.

Members may be aware that the Education Minister and I have been working to support the childcare sector during the pandemic, and I want to take the opportunity to provide you with an update on this work. Some £12 million has been invested in a COVID-19 childcare sector support scheme, which primarily aims to ensure the continuity of childcare through the pandemic for vulnerable children and the children of key workers and to support the sustainability of the sector in the certain knowledge that we will need childcare to be available when we return to the new normal.

The scheme will cover the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020 and will provide support for four categories of childcare provider. The first is for open day care and school-age childcare settings. The second is for closed day care and school-age childcare settings. The third is for childminders who are continuing to provide childcare, and the last is for day care workers who have been providing childcare in the homes of key workers under a bespoke, approved home childcare system. Any provider who falls within any of the four categories has now been invited to apply for financial support from the scheme. We expect around 1,500 applications, covering all four categories of the scheme, to be submitted this month.

In conclusion, Chair, I am conscious that I have taken some time to provide this update and that members will be keen to ask a number of important questions. I hope that the update is useful and has, hopefully, covered a number of points that members intend to raise.

To finish my statement, I would like to add that, as ever, the people who are employed in the care of others are, and continue to be, our greatest asset. They need to be looked after and cared for in return. It does not give me any pleasure to say that, over the last decade, Stormont has let the NHS down. It has not looked after health and social care services as well as it could have. Under devolution, this place has had very limited control over finance and that has made things very difficult. Vital services have been underfunded, short-term decisions were preferred over long-term planning, difficult choices were ducked, staff were left to feel unappreciated and social care was particularly neglected. This happened in other countries too, so Northern Ireland is not unique, but a bit of humility and reflection would be in order around the House. Underfunding and short-term planning led to staff levels becoming depleted. Persistent single-year budgets have seen healthcare surviving hand to mouth, with a limited ability to plan strategically and deliver better services. Similarly, lack of proper pay and career structures in social care left our care homes exposed. Running health and social care on close to empty for 10 years has robbed it of capacity, resilience and flexibility. It left us with no option but to scramble to free up capacity and procure much-needed equipment, at pace.

In conclusion, I put on record again my thanks to all those front-line workers who are giving so much and to all those who are working behind the scenes to enable our fight to continue.

I now welcome any questions that you have. Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for his statement. I will allow around one hour for questions to the Minister. Given the position that he holds, members, it is not my intention to keep the Minister in the Chamber for

any significant amount of time over that hour. Please keep questions focused and direct. I will allow supplementary questions, but it is not necessary for every member to ask one if the answer to the initial question is sufficient.

Mr Gildernew (Committee Chair - Committee for Health):

I thank the Minister for his statement today and for coming to the Chamber to answer questions. I acknowledge his remarks that there are no perfect answers and that this is a hugely complex situation. However, the Minister will agree that where mistakes were made, it is crucial that they are identified and are not repeated, given that we are likely to face further waves of the pandemic and, potentially, future pandemics. So, learning the lessons and implementing the learning is crucial.

This morning, the Health Committee was addressed by an acknowledged panel of experts. We heard that the decision of the British Government on 12 March to end contact tracing had created an enormous explosion in the spread of COVID-19. Does the Minister agree with that assessment?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair and I apologise to him and the Committee that I was unable to attend last Thursday's Committee meeting. The Chief Medical Officer and I were meant to be there but, because the time of the Executive meeting moved, we were unable to attend. We are here today, however, to address the Ad Hoc Committee.

The Chair is actually conflating his statements. He is saying, "Let us look and learn lessons", but I would prefer him to say, "Let us get us through this first and then look at making sure that any mistakes that were made are not repeated". To dissect and look at issues that happened only a few weeks ago would actually start to tie up time and commitment when we should actually look at what we are doing now. The fact is that we have established our own contact tracing team here in Northern Ireland. It is already on the ground and working in care homes. There are 58 contact tracers, and 24 additional people have been trained this week. While I know where the Chairperson is going with his question, and I know that his question is genuine and his intention to ensure that this does not happen again is well placed, let us not start now to dissect the steps that we have taken over the past weeks. Let us get through the situation that we are in now, and, then, let us learn lessons on what could have been done better and what we have to do to prepare for the next phase.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, it causes me concern that we are saying that we will wait until a later stage to look at that. I am asking that lessons that have been acknowledged are looked at now and implemented, so that we do not repeat those mistakes. I know that steps are being taken to ramp up case finding, testing, contact tracing and potential isolation for those people, but, given that we were at a different place on the curve to Britain at that time, does the Minister acknowledge that it was a mistake for us to cease contact tracing here? My question is not about looking back: it is about preparing for further waves of the pandemic.

Mr Swann: That is what I am saying to you, Chair. We have our contact tracing scheme up and running. We have 58 contact tracers in place. That is far above what was in place when we were caught at the start of the pandemic, and we were actually relying on PHA to do that contact tracing. We have brought in a professional system now.

We are setting up our own professional team to do that. We have made leaps and bounds to move contact tracing from where we were then to where we are now. A big change has been made there. When the pandemic started, it was about contact tracing and seeing who had been in contact with someone with COVID-19. What we are looking at now is tracing and supporting people. That is the important step that was not there at the beginning. When someone is identified through contact tracing as having COVID-19, a support measure comes in behind that to encourage them to stay at home and not to go back into the workplace or society to spread the virus further.

Mrs Cameron (Committee Deputy Chair - Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. We will all welcome the de-escalation of the surge level in order for emergency surgery to be reintroduced. Given the concern about the volume of deaths that are not related to COVID-19 in Northern Ireland, it is disappointing that NISRA's response has not been more helpful in ensuring accurate reporting. Of course, the move ahead with reform and investment plans is very much welcome.

What engagement and support has the Minister had from unions on any additional proposals to combat the virus in care homes and protect them from coronavirus outbreaks?

Mr Swann: Across the entire piece, we have had good engagement with the entire workforce and support from the trade unions. There has been one disappointing aspect, which, I think, was reported in one newspaper this morning. We suggested bringing forward the safe at home scheme, which would actually have seen care home employees living in care homes for a period, and, by doing that, would have reduced their interaction. Unfortunately, trade union colleagues had a number of concerns, which did not allow us to move on at that point earlier this week. Although that particular scheme that we were looking at with regard to a number of homes has not been able to progress due to those concerns, we are now in contact with other care home providers to see whether any of them want to pick up the scheme. The Department has allocated a pot of money, which is supported by the Executive, so that the opportunity that that scheme could provide is not lost. Our relationship with trade union colleagues has been good throughout this. We have relied on trade unions here in Northern Ireland, and on staff, to pull out all the stops and work together with us on this.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. I hope that the safe at home scheme goes ahead in some format because it stands to sense that it could, very much, be a way to reduce infection. Minister, you will be aware that speech and language therapists are actively lobbying the Department for recognition of the vital work that they do with COVID-19 patients, which includes undertaking swallowing assessments. Will the Minister give a commitment here today that those speech and language therapists will be allowed to access full — that is, code red — PPE while providing that high-risk, close-contact and life-saving assessment, whether in hospital or in a care home setting?

Mr Swann: The member has written to me on that specific issue, and it is something that is being actively pursued. It is not the swallowing but the cough reflex that speech and language therapists are especially worried about, because it involves the transfer of droplets. The matter is being

reviewed and updated, because something was drawn to our attention.

After we established it, we visited the Newtownards MOT centre where we were doing the testing, and there was a speech and language therapist on the front line doing swabs in full gear, because the individual understood the gag reflex, which helped for some of the swabs. Our speech and language therapists are stepping up. They are going above and beyond their normal work and supporting the front-line battle against COVID-19 as part of our overall response. Providing them with PPE is an active issue that we are looking at in the Department.

Ms S Bradley: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I wish to refer to the issue of care homes. Minister, I know that you are aware, and I am aware, that if staff members in care homes suspect themselves to be symptomatic and do the right thing by staying at home, they will do so without pay. That is a vulnerability and a weakness for the staff member and all the residents of the care home. I therefore ask the Minister whether he will take urgent action and stop that today. As you said, this is not a time to reflect on how it has happened but a question of making it stop now.

Mr Swann: I thank the member for her point. We are now reliant on the private sector for the employment of a lot of those individuals and know that they are moved to statutory sick pay. It is not no pay but statutory sick pay. A lot of them are already working for minimum wage.

One of the recommendations talked about at the Executive this morning was to do exactly what the member asks. Minister Poots raised the issue and was very supportive of the argument that I was putting forward. Therefore, as to whether the Executive are on board with what the member raises, I will have a paper very shortly with the Minister of Finance, and, to give his office its dues, we are getting support there. Issues that we put to it are progressed very quickly, and the money has been coming forward.

We also have to be aware of the responsibility that lies with the employer, however. Even though the overall pay rate for some people has been cut, they should not be put in a position in which they are coming into a workplace and increasing the risk of the spread of COVID-19.

Ms S Bradley: Thank you, Minister. I did have a supplementary on the all-Ireland approach, but I feel the need to go back to my original question and ask whether this is really the time for papers. We are talking about the people who are holding the hands of people in homes today so that they do not die alone. They are the people on whom we rely so heavily. Can we as an Executive not find a way in which to do this today?

Mr Swann: What I will say to the member is this: we were at an Executive meeting this morning, and we are going back to it, I would say, as soon as I come out of the Chamber. I will raise the issue with the Executive, but, owing to the transparency and the accountability that we have to have, there are business cases and papers to be put in, but they are being processed very quickly. Honestly, I have never seen the Executive as agile. They are responding very aptly to the proposals and the need that has arisen as a result of COVID-19. It is an issue that has been raised, and I can assure the member that I will raise it again later this afternoon.

Mr Chambers: Minister, you referred to the hurlers from the ditch, which illustrates an important point. You also referred to the wisdom of Solomon. A lot of the hurlers from the ditch out there seem to think that they possess double the wisdom that Solomon ever had.

I welcome the increased testing in our nursing and care homes. However, as the Minister has often said, testing does not provide immunity from the virus. I understand that anyone, no matter what age or circumstances, could test negative one day but positive the next. In recognising the frail condition of many of the older people in our homes, can the Minister advise what support has been made available to our homes to allow them to carry out tests properly and with sensitivity?

Mr Swann: I thank the member. As I said in the statement, I am not a follower of Gaelic games but, when I heard the phrase “a hurler from the ditch”, I asked about it, and a member of the SDLP provided me with an explanation of it. Now that I know what that phrase means, I have never seen as many of them as in Northern Ireland, and especially on Twitter.

As regards testing in support of those in care homes, we have utilised the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and those 40 HSC nurses to do that. As I said to Pam Cameron, the gag reflex makes it difficult to take the sample.

I can tell the Member something that was just finalised as I left the office this morning. Four mobile testing units, which are part of the national testing programme, have been assigned to Northern Ireland. They will be deploying from the start of next week. I intend to use the first in the south-west, because we do not have a permanent fixture there at the minute. As the other units come online, at weekly intervals, they will be deployed to support programmes for the sampling of clean, non-outbreak care homes, and other cluster outbreaks as required. This is a step up. We will be using the national testing programme, and those mobile test units, to reinforce what we have started with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.

Mr Chambers: Can residents, or their next of kin on their behalf, decline to undertake a test? Could that present a problem in the grand scheme of things?

Mr Swann: I assume that they can, Alan. The individual has a right to do that, because that is medical practice. I do not advise anyone to go down that path, because it is critical that we know where the virus is in care homes, so that we can manage it. I will have to check. I would say that they have the right to refuse, but I would plead with them and advise them not to do so.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for his statement. My question relates to the comprehensive recovery plan. When do you expect that, and how will you make it public?

Mr Swann: I thank the member. We will bring it forward in stages. The surge plan was schemed to move in four steps, depending on how virulent the virus was across Northern Ireland, as to where we had to step down. We will do the same with the surge plan, and we will step it up as quickly as we possibly can. We will make the tower block at the City Hospital available for surgery and cancer treatments as soon as we can. I will bring that plan forward to the Assembly as we make each stage, as I did with the surge plan, when we were reducing that. We should see

the outworkings of that, and the additional steps taken, within the next fortnight.

Ms Bradshaw: Further to that, on communication with the staff and, ultimately, with patients, some of whom have been waiting for procedures for many years, it is important that we let them know when they can expect treatment.

Mr Swann: The member makes a valid point. As we go through this system, with the changes that may and will be possible, we will need a lot of cooperation from the general public.

Usually, notification of a procedure is received six weeks in advance. If we get systems up and running more quickly, we will say to people that, if they get notification to come in for a procedure, an elective surgery or a treatment with very little notice, please accept that invitation as quickly as possible. If you cannot, let the trust know, so that we can fill those appointments. Before we went into the COVID-19 crisis, the number of no-shows was a problem for a lot of our services across Northern Ireland. To get Northern Ireland back on its feet, and to get as many people as possible through our services, we need that support and that continual flow of patients coming forward.

Mr T Buchanan: How many trust staff have been redeployed to a care home setting since the COVID-19 outbreak? What is the Department's longer-term plan to meet the gaps in staffing when normal services resume?

Mr Swann: I apologise to the member that I do not have exact figures to hand. I can give examples of two homes. A home in Belfast has availed itself of the support of 48 Belfast Trust staff, and another, in the Northern Trust area, availed itself of 27 trust staff. Those are significant numbers of people and hours being covered, though I do not have the exact detail. As I said in the statement, we should make sure that the people working in those sectors feel valued and supported and that they are supported financially, through training and with everything else that they need, to fill those posts. We will have a commitment from the trusts, which is a necessity, to support our care home sector for the next number of weeks, if not months, to make sure that the necessary staffing level is there to support the residents of care homes, as we will undoubtedly see people going off sick, as we have seen across the rest of the health service.

Ms Dillon: With your indulgence, I apologise to Mr Carroll for walking in front of him. It was not my intention to do so. I stood in the doorway until the Minister had finished speaking, and, when I started to walk, Mr Carroll was called. I am sure that you are delighted to have Mr Wells jumping to your defence, Gerry [Laughter.] Thank you, Minister, for your statement. Can you confirm what data is being collected in relation to HSC staff who test positive for COVID?

Mr Swann: First of all, I express my disgust at the death threat that the member has received. In this day and age, we should not be in the sphere where that is happening to any politician in Northern Ireland. We should have moved far beyond that. A number of other members, including my party leader, were also affected by such threats. I just wanted to make that point.

In regard to the data that is collected, when a trust member goes off sick after testing positive for COVID, it is reported through the Business Services Organisation (BSO), so

we have statistics for people affected and their level in the service. As I said in my statement, we have just over 300 who are off because they are COVID-positive, which is a very low percentage of the 71,000 staff who are employed across all trusts.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister give a commitment to include that information on the dashboard and as part of the NISRA figures?

Mr Swann: I cannot give a commitment in regard to NISRA because it is the national statistics body for Northern Ireland and sits outside my scope. It falls under the scope of the Department of Finance but has its own ability to produce whatever figures it sees fit. The dashboard is an evolving tool that has bits of public information added to it regularly. I can raise the issue directly with those in my Department's information analysis directorate (IAD) who are in charge of the dashboard. If the Member would find the inclusion of that figure useful, I will ask them to consider that request.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for the update and for all his work throughout what has been a very difficult time during the crisis. In relation to the role of the RQIA, I understand that the mandatory and routine inspections were suspended. Do you, as Minister, regret those inspections being suspended during the crisis? Do you fully recognise the importance of inspection and surveillance in giving assurance to the public and the residents of care homes?

Mr Swann: We repurposed some RQIA staff at an early stage of the pandemic so that we could utilise the skills of the social workers and the nurses that were in there so that they could go in and provide advice to care homes. We moved them from that inspection role to a supporting role. Those inspections still can take place, those inspections still do take place and those inspections still are taking place. They may not take place at the frequency that they used to be, but, if someone has a concern about a particular home or the practice in it, they can still contact RQIA and raise it, because it still has that inspection function.

Mr Dunne: In your statement, you mentioned "contacts" that are made with RQIA. Obviously that is done over the phone or through an IT system. Will you give us an assurance that the inspectors are going in, not just to do inspections but to carry out surveillance? Someone who is experienced in doing audits does not need to carry out full inspections; if they are there, they will quickly be able to see the quality in the home and give everyone an assurance that they are working to the required standards? Is that continuing?

Mr Swann: Yes, it is. If someone has a concern about quality, RQIA will still go in and do an inspection. That concern can be raised by a family member, a staff member or a resident. I will also say to the member that, because we are now at a point where there are trust staff going into those homes, they act as, I suppose, the unofficial eyes and ears of the Department to ensure that those standards are there. They have a duty of care and a responsibility as trust staff going in to supply that support and guidance so that the homes work to the appropriate guidance and standards. Part of the work that is being done on infection control, especially as regards homes where we have COVID-19, is critical as well. We had 70

dental students come forward at an early stage to go in and supply infection control guidance and training for care homes. That was another set of eyes and ears going into care homes so that, if there were concerns, they could be raised, because they have a professional responsibility, if there is unsafe practice, to report it.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister referred to "hurlers in the ditch", and, clearly, there are some; in every field of life, you will come across them. However, he must also accept that international best practice and advice from the likes of the World Health Organization (WHO) and internationally renowned scientists should be taken on board. Those guys could tog out for Kilkenny or Tipperary — or Antrim, on a good day. Does the Minister agree with me that we have to follow international best practice when tackling the virus?

Mr Swann: I do not know what "tog out" means, but I am sure it is a term that the member can update me on later.

With regard to best practice, yes, the guidance is there. When it has come and when it has been practical and applicable for us to follow, we have taken it on. We have not always been in step with it all at every point in time. I know that the member's party has been particularly vocal on the "Test, test, test" scenario. We were testing with the capability and capacity that we had at that stage, and the point has been made by that party with regard to the World Health Organization guidance that came forward. With regard to the Executive programme going forward and the health advice that underpinned that, there is recognition and acknowledgement of WHO guidance and advice and of international best practice.

Mr O'Dowd: In another element of his speech, the Minister rightly referred to the inequalities in pay structures and conditions for staff. Does he also agree that, as we recover from the epidemic, we need to tackle the health inequalities that exist? That has to be a key feature of any future health plan.

Mr Swann: I do. It is one of those conversations —. The things that we were doing that were innovative were pilots, as I said, that we were getting single budgets for. The likes of our multidisciplinary teams were going to be earth-shattering, earth-changing and health-changing in certain communities. We were putting social workers and pharmacists into GP surgeries so that we could start to tackle the mental health inequalities and differentials in supply that we saw across Northern Ireland. We can take on board those lessons as we come into our re-engagement phase between this surge and doing as much work as we can to prevent the next surge. The inequalities across our system are something that we should take the opportunity now to correct.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I note that the Member for Upper Bann and Mr McNulty are both wearing their Armagh orange ties today, so I congratulate them. Sometimes, it is all right to be an Orangeman, John *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNulty: The future is orange *[Laughter.]* I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that the social care system was not fit for purpose and was in need of reform and investment. Those who work with the most vulnerable in our care system have to be acknowledged, especially in the care homes that have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the many questions and concerns around the handling of COVID-19 in our care homes, will the

Minister commit to calling an independent public inquiry into the handling of the response to COVID-19 when we get through to the other side of the pandemic?

Mr Swann: As I said to the Chair of the Health Committee, when we get through to the other side of this, there will be many inquiries. There will be national, international and worldwide inquiries, and, at that point, we have to use them as learning tools for where we were, what we should have done and when we could have done it. There is no point in getting to the other side of this and not being prepared for the next virus that comes. It may not be a coronavirus, and it may not be a novel virus, but we will look to the learnings that we have to take out of this. As I have said in previous statements in the Chamber, we became so reliant on that just-in-time PPE international supply chain always being there that we did not value it for what it was. Now we do, and that is why it is critical that we learn in that sphere as well to make sure that we have local manufacturing there to support our PPE supply.

Mr McNulty: The Minister referred to “hurlers in the ditch”. Tomorrow evening, I am going to go “Hairless for the hospice”. I have raised about £2,000, and I challenge the Minister and everybody else in the Chamber to see who are the hurlers in the ditch. Who will step up to the plate and go hairless for the hospice for the hospices in their area? I know that there are a few people who look a bit scaldy, including the Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle and Big Jim. Let us see who will go hairless for the hospice and raise as much money as we can for hospices, whose services have been cut and who need every source of funding that they can get.

Mr Swann: I do not understand exactly what the scheme is. It sounds very good. If it is raising money, it is definitely worthwhile. I will give the member a tenner, but I have no idea what he is asking me to do, to be honest.

Mr Butler: You certainly have today coined the phrase “hurler in the ditch”. You outlined that the chief hurlers on the ditch were maybe on Twitter. The media also have a role to play. Sometimes, the media have been good and, sometimes, not so good at this time of crisis across these islands. The chief exponent of hurling in the ditch is, in my opinion, Piers Morgan.

Minister, there was a BBC report today — I think it was to do with NHS England — regarding a fear that the learning disability community has regarding testing. You have outlined some steps that you have taken on testing for our community. Can you reassure us that people who have a learning disability or any disability will not be disadvantaged in any way when it comes to availing themselves of testing for COVID-19?

Mr Swann: I give the member that commitment here and now. One of the cohorts that were in our original testing programme was those who lived in supported learning, which included those with mental health and learning difficulties. I have no problem giving the member that commitment.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for his statement. He indicated that our waiting lists were deteriorating even further than they were before we went into the pandemic. That will continue to be the case, particularly around things like mental health, if we do not start to have some form of relaxation. I know that the Minister is under particular pressure, because, often, his Executive colleagues will

say that they follow the science and the medical advice and then look to the Minister of Health. Can the Minister of Health give any indication of the scientific and medical advice being provided to him on when we will see step 1 of the Executive plan that was announced earlier this week?

Mr Swann: As I said, we came out of an Executive meeting this morning, and we are going back into one this afternoon and into the evening. Those meetings are looking at exactly where we are with our recovery plan and the steps. That Executive meeting is being attended by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, as has become nearly the norm for the past number of Executive meetings. It is not just the medical and scientific advice that has been given to me; it has been given to the entirety of the Executive.

Mr Givan: In having confidence that decisions are being taken on the medical and scientific evidence, can the Minister give the Committee an assurance that, when he makes recommendations based on scientific and medical advice, they are then adopted by the Executive? It was well documented that he provided advice in respect to the reopening of cemeteries that other parties did not endorse initially and took a week to do so. As we go forward into step 1, the public need to have confidence that, when this Minister makes recommendations based on that advice, the Executive follow them. Does the power rest with the Minister to act on this solely, or is it a collective decision that needs to be taken?

Mr Swann: As we take the steps to come out of this, we have to do it collectively. The advice and guidance in regard to the regulations rest with Health. They rest in my remit legally, and, at the end of the day, I have to sign them and seal them on behalf of the Department of Health. The legal duty of moving through regulations rests with me.

Ms C Kelly: The Department tells us that we have the capacity to complete 2,000 tests per day. Minister, can you explain why we have not been using this to full capacity when it is clear that widespread testing is necessary for pandemic control?

Mr Swann: I thank the member for her question. I am not sure whether she is aware of the dashboard that the Department now produces on a daily basis, which adds up the number of tests that we report internally and the number of completed tests through the national testing programme. Today, that dashboard will show that we completed 2,142 tests. Yesterday, we completed 1,994 tests across both those divisions. When it comes to capacity, we are getting there. One of the things we have been able to do is utilise the spare capacity that we had within our system, and that is where we are targeting tests for the care homes through the Ambulance Service.

I will say to the member: that is not where we will stop. It is about increasing that capacity, it is working with our colleagues in AFBI, it is working with some of the private sector as well to make sure that we can roll-up that capacity. As I said in response to Alan Chambers, part of that national capacity is the four mobile testing units that can do about 200 tests as well. So, over the next four or five weeks, that will be an extra 800 tests per day. It is about utilising that at a continual pace and with continual expansion. Again, like anything else in Health, as I said to Paula Bradshaw, we need people to turn up to take the tests. It is important that if people do want a

test, they actually turn up. Again, we are putting one of the mobile units into the south-west because we do not have a permanent fixture there.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. I know that you will be aware of the recent news about outbreaks among staff at food processing factories. You mentioned the four mobile testing units that will arrive next week. Can you commit to there being a testing unit in Omagh? Currently, those working in food processing in Omagh have to travel the significant distance to Derry, Craigavon or Belfast.

Mr Swann: Again, it was not in the main statement, because I only got the confirmation before I came out of the office. However, out of those four testing units, the first mobile unit, which should come online within the next week, has been assigned to the south-west. Therefore, the workers will be able to avail themselves of that testing facility if they are symptomatic or feel that they need to be tested.

Mr Lyttle: It is essential that the Executive recognise the importance of the childcare sector to the well-being of our children and access to employment for workers. I thank the childcare sector for the role that it is playing during the pandemic, and for the work that it has done with diligent Health and Education officials to contribute to the childcare support scheme. Can I ask the Health Minister to do all that he can to support the urgent and successful implementation of the childcare support scheme, and give a timescale for allocation of funding to childcare providers?

Mr Swann: As I said in the statement, any provider who falls into one of the four categories that I listed is eligible. The categories are: open day care and school-age childcare settings; closed day care and school-age childcare settings; childminders who are continuing to provide childcare; and day-care workers who are providing childcare in the homes of key workers under the bespoke, approved home childcare scheme. That fourth grouping is especially important to Northern Ireland, and it is something that is unique to Northern Ireland. We expect around 1,500 applications covering all four categories of the scheme, and those will be submitted this month. It is about getting those processed through BSO as quickly as we can. We know that it is something, as Chair of the Committee, that the member has been particularly vocal on.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Health Minister for that update and the support for childcare. Can the Minister give some indication of why it has taken so long to implement a community testing, contact tracing and isolation programme? Can he give us some idea of the specific participation that it will require from the public to be successful?

Mr Swann: It is one of the things that we need to get right. We have 58 trained operators who are starting to do contact tracing. They are mostly focusing on our care homes. We are training an extra 24 a day. It is about working with the script that they will be using so that they ask the right questions, identify the right people and give the right advice. As I said earlier, we must also ensure that the support package is there to encourage people to self-isolate. It is about making sure that we get that script right. We must also ensure that the database and computer systems that capture the data are secure. There is, therefore, a lot of work going on behind the scenes. Work is also ongoing on the app that has been talked

about widely, but which still seems to be a number of weeks off. Work is being done on how we adopt and utilise it to ensure the security of data that is captured. There are, therefore, a number of technical issues. However, I can assure the member about the 58 workers that we have now and the 24 who are being trained this week. That manual, telephone and personal contact is up and running, and working, and we can utilise it as soon as possible, but it is about making sure that we are asking the right questions and asking the right people to isolate.

Mr Frew: The Executive have published their five-step plan, which is based on science. Can the Minister assure the Committee and inform us about how that science is implemented? How does the Minister connect the R rate with the decisions along the steps?

Mr Swann: The Department of Health developed an Executive paper and matrix showing how we scored such factors as the threat to public health, the effect on the economy and the effect on social well-being. There is a fourth topic, but it has escaped me. Each proposal that has been put forward has been scored across that matrix. It is not based solely on the R value. We are taking requests to look at individual topics as each Minister comes forward. As discussed today, the Executive will publish the skills matrix so that the public can understand how they have taken the decisions as we move to step one, step two, step three and, eventually, step four, where we return to a sphere of normality. We will publish the skills matrix later today or, possibly, tomorrow. It will let members see how those decisions are taken.

Mr Frew: As a North Antrim colleague, I wish the Minister all the best, as I have done up to this point. I hear what the Minister says about the suite of calculations that are needed to make steps, but will testing help the accuracy of the R rate? What other measures will help the accuracy of the R rate?

Mr Swann: I did not hear it, but, from what I have heard from others, Professor Young, our Chief Scientific Adviser, did a good job of explaining what the R rate means on yesterday's 'The Nolan Show'. The R rate can be measured over a number of things. In our scenario, we use the number of people in ICU beds, the number of admissions and the number of positive cases. That is done over the past 10 days. When we see a slow decrease in the number of those three measures, the R rate starts to move down very slowly. It is a slow, gradual decrease, because we are taking it over the past 10 days. It is something that we are depending on and something that we look at, but it is not the sole factor in our decision-making process, for want of a better description.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister provide an update on the contact tracing infrastructure that is being put in place? How many people are fully trained? How many are expected to be trained up? How many contact tracing centres are there? Where are those centres?

Mr Swann: We have 58 staff situated in Belfast at this time. BSO is training 24 this week. It is very intense one-to-one training. As we step up that training, we will be looking at dispersing the staff around the country, because there is no point in having everybody sitting in the same tracing centre. If they were, and we got an outbreak of COVID-19 in one of those centres, all of the people who should be trying to trace COVID-19 would be self-isolating at the same time.

It is, therefore, vital that we spread them out across the Province. On the estimation, in the initial phase, we are moving up to 300 and then, potentially, up to 600 if we see that necessity and we do not see the management of COVID-19 across Northern Ireland actually decrease. So, our first target is to scale up to that 300.

We have 800 volunteers who have indicated that they would like to be part of that process, but we have to be cognisant that the contact tracing scheme will be with us for 18 months to two years or possibly longer, so it is not just about relying on those volunteers or environmental health workers who are volunteering to get us up and running initially. It is about looking at this as a long-term Civil Service deployment because it will be here with us for quite some time.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you for that, Minister. Like most other people, I am interested in your use of the “hurlers from the ditch” analogy. As someone who played hurling — and not too many in this House can say that — hurlers from the ditch are irrelevant for anyone who plays hurling. At the minute, Minister, you are playing senior hurling. You are playing senior championship. However, you have to recognise — and my colleague John O’Dowd mentioned it earlier — that there is a cohort of experts out there — people like Sián Griffiths, who co-chaired the Hong Kong inquiry into the SARS epidemic in 2003, and Michael J Ryan, who led the line for the World Health Organization in west Africa in 14 of the 17 Ebola outbreaks — who have been very critical of the SAGE advice and the decisions that were made by the British Government. That is not retrospective. They were critical of it at the time. I am saying to you, Minister, that you need to take advice other than that which is being given by SAGE in London. That is very important. Hurlers from the ditch are irrelevant. Let us look to the real experts: the hurlers on the pitch.

Mr Swann: I understand that analogy. I mentioned to Paula earlier that our Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Medical Officer are now talking to the Executive as a whole. I think that the member will see that we are now moving. We always have moved away and plotted our own course, and even more so now in regards to the decisions that the Executive are making.

On the publication of our step plan, we did not do the same as Dublin or Westminster by putting dates and time frames on it. We said that we would be led by the science and would take the right steps at the right time. That proves that, as an Executive, we are taking that guidance and direction from those experts who are on the pitch at this minute in time.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): These sporting analogies are making me very tired. The closest I get to sport is bowls on a Monday evening in Ravenhill Presbyterian Church. That is how exciting I am.

Mr O’Toole: I hope that you are not getting close to that sport at the minute —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): No.

Mr O’Toole: — given that we are all supposed to be at home. I have also played hurling, but I did it really badly, so I will not position myself as a hurling expert or, indeed, an epidemiologist.

I thank the Health Minister for his hard work, which I do not think that anyone in this House will doubt, and I also thank

him for coming and giving us an update today. Can I ask him about representation from Northern Ireland on SAGE? There had been reports that Dr McBride, our Chief Medical Officer, has been just an observer on that group. Does Dr McBride or anyone else from here have full membership of SAGE?

Mr Swann: Professor Ian Young, our Chief Scientific Adviser, is a full member of SAGE.

Mr O’Toole: Thank you for clarifying that. That is useful.

On contact tracing, the Minister mentioned that we want to get to 300 contact tracers building up to 600. Can he give us a time frame as to when he thinks that is essential? Is that specifically tied, in his mind, to a releasing of the restrictions?

Mr Swann: They all move in step, Matthew, to be honest. There is no point easing restrictions if we have an outbreak and are not able to trace it and find out where it is, so there will be a step. We will not necessarily have to delay the lifting of our restrictions depending on the number of contact tracers we have, but there is a correlation to make sure that we can find and trace the virus if there is a spike in a certain area where we need to move in again and start to put in more localised restrictions. So, there is a correlation, but they are not tied to each other.

Mr Wells: Minister, I am the only person in the Chamber who has sat in your seat. It was very difficult five years’ ago; I think that it is almost impossible what you have to deal with at the moment. We wish you well.

I know nothing about hurling and want to know nothing about hurling [Laughter] so I will not use any analogy about that.

I take you back to the R value. The R value at the minute is given as 0.79, but you also said that the R value in nursing homes, which, unfortunately, I am a bit of an authority on, for reasons that you will know, is double that. Frankly, closing garden centres, golf courses or recycling plants will not reduce the R value in one nursing home. Are we in danger of locking down our economy and destroying many good jobs on the basis of an R value that is skewed towards nursing homes, when none of the restrictions will do anything to reduce that figure?

Mr Swann: May I say to the member that I know how challenging it is that nursing homes have been closed to visitors? I pass on my personal respects to him and to Grace while they get through this difficult personal time.

The R number that he refers to is not the R number that we use at this minute in time. It is not connected to nursing homes, so they are not part of the calculation. I think that, when Professor Young, our Chief Scientific Adviser, talked about that the other morning, he referred to an R value in certain nursing homes. What we have to be cognisant of is that it is impossible to give an R figure to nursing homes in the generality, because they are their own isolated, closed spheres, or they should be. In the nursing homes where we currently do not have COVID-19, the R value is not applicable because there is no virus, there is no spread. In the homes where we have a high incidence and spread, that is where we get to the figure above 1, which is where the concern is and where the virus is spreading. There is no R number for the generality of nursing homes that is applicable. The R number that we use and that is quoted is

not affected by the calculation of nursing home infection, Jim.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Wells?

Mr Wells: Almost a month ago, we all welcomed the announcement by the Public Health Agency that 500 staff would be engaged to carry out testing, particularly in nursing homes. We learned today that that was never delivered; in fact, we are talking about less than 10% of that figure. We were told that environmental health officers from councils, who are effectively in furlough, would be used. What went wrong? Why was that announcement made, and why was it not delivered?

Mr Swann: Jim, I would need to check the announcement that you refer to, because the use of environmental health officers was brought forward to engage in the contact tracing app, rather than testing in nursing homes. If you have another announcement that, you think, I have made, I am perfectly glad to follow up on it after this, but the environmental health officers were in regard to contact tracing. Some of those are being used, and I am aware that there is a service-level agreement and some ongoing conversations. I am happy to take up the issue with the member outside the House, because I am not sure that he and I are talking about the same thing at this minute in time, and I want to get him the right answer.

Mr McCrossan: I too thank the Minister for making his statement to the Chamber today and outlining the many important initiatives that he has undertaken. I also take the opportunity, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, to thank all our health and social care staff, who have given everything and sacrificed so much to save so many lives. We will be for ever indebted to them.

Minister, in recent weeks families in my constituency and throughout the Western Trust have lost loved ones to various illnesses: cancer, heart disease and others not related to COVID-19 and with no symptoms of such. However, when it came to the death certificate, it outlined COVID-19 as the cause of death. The Minister will know that will cause great distress to many families. They would argue that that is entirely incorrect, because there was no test to suggest such or, in the event of such a test, it tested negative. Is the Minister aware that that is happening? Will he explain why it happens and say whether an instruction is coming from his Department to the medical professionals who are doing that?

Mr Swann: I can assure the member that there is no instruction coming from my Department to register COVID-19 deaths where the person has not been diagnosed with it. I will say to the member that, if a death is registered in the community where there have been or there are suspected to have been COVID-19 symptoms, there may be an occasion where a medical professional will record it on the death certificate, even if there has not been a positive case. I had the issue raised with me at the start of this week. It is something that I am looking into, but, with regard to a direction being given, there would be no rationale or reason why we would ask any medical professional to record COVID-19 on a death certificate when it was neither proven nor suspected

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for his clarification of my question. As you will understand, it is a sensitive issue, and it would come as a great surprise to families who find themselves in such circumstances. Without

going into the details of the case, I am aware that there were no symptoms in this particular matter and that the person was not on a COVID-19 ward or anything like it. It was very sudden, and there was a clear reason for it. What assurance can you give, in the event that someone has COVID-19 put on their death certificate as the reason for death, about how can the family go about changing or challenging that, when it is actually incorrect?

Mr Swann: In honesty, I am not sure how that process would be undertaken, but I will check it out and get back to the member in writing. I will provide it in guidance to the rest of the members in the House as well, because, if there are scenarios where that has happened, there should be a clear line of query or challenge.

Mr McGrath: I want to ask the Minister about the reconfiguration of services. Are you aware that there are theatre staff from the Downe Hospital who have been relocated to the Ulster Hospital to prepare for the surge? The surge has thankfully not arrived, so they are being left with very little work to do. Some of them are taking annual leave because there is not work to be completed, and, yet, the work that they would have delivered in the Downe will, from 1 June, be delivered by a private outside company. That is very worrying to the staff, who are concerned about their futures amongst all of the distress that comes with the pandemic. Is the Minister aware that private companies are coming in to deliver services that our staff should be doing?

Mr Swann: On our surge planning, those individuals were purposely relocated and re-profiled so that we would be prepared for the surge. As he says, thankfully, it has not happened. Let us remember that we are only weeks away from our first case, when we were looking for that reasonable worst-case scenario. On re-profiling those staff, those were the steps that we took at that point in time because it was the right thing to do. We brought in private providers to make sure that there was some continued delivery of services while we redeployed our staff. As for asking me for an assurance on whether they will have enough work to do, I can assure you that, with the waiting lists and everything else that we saw long before COVID-19 struck Northern Ireland, our waiting lists are long enough to provide them with a guarantee of work in the future.

Mr McGrath: I welcome that statement. I am sure that it will go a long way to helping people, certainly in the Downe Hospital, and I hope that they will not be forgotten with plenty of work for the future.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister has mentioned some issues with the roll-out of the potential contact tracing app, and some of that has included the protection of data, which is obviously an incredibly sensitive matter. Will the Minister seek legal advice on the matter before any further steps are taken on its use in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: Yes, because we have data protection issues and issues around how we interact, especially with our colleagues and counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, in regard to data sharing. That will be data sharing across an EU border, so we will take legal advice, as well as the section 75 guidance in regard to the implementation and the roll-out of that, because of how that will potentially capture personal data.

Miss Woods: This is completely different. The road map that was published on Tuesday by the Executive had a number of holes in it. It did not show any information for those who are shielding, following the letters that were issued, which is due to end in six weeks. Does the Minister expect that period to be extended? If so, will the Department issue further guidance on that?

Mr Swann: Yes, we will. It is important that, in regard to the individuals whom we asked to shield themselves from the start, it was a request, not an insistence. I want to make that clear to the member. The letters that went out asked those people to shield themselves away; we were not asking them to cut themselves off from the community in totality. We asked them to shield themselves from the virus. If, at the assessment in six weeks' time — we will have to look at this before then to make sure that they are supported to do that — the medical and scientific guidance is that we should ask them to maintain shielding for a further period, we will issue more guidance and make sure that the support is there for them, be that food deliveries or deliveries from community pharmacies to ensure that they get their prescriptions. We will make sure that all those provisions and support measures are still in place.

Mr Allister: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, maybe you will permit me one moment, initially, to ask the Minister to convey, on behalf of the community and the Smyth family, very deep appreciation to the expert staff in the Royal Victoria Hospital for their Trojan efforts to save the life of young Hannah Smyth following the heartbreaking incident in our constituency on Tuesday. Of course, I am sure that we all join in sending our condolences to that family on the indescribable pain and loss that they have suffered.

The Chief Medical Officer has publicly stated that the R figure is low enough, and has been low enough for a sufficient time, to justify relaxations in the lockdown — maybe the Minister will tell us what that figure is today. The Chief Medical Officer says that the National Health Service has not been overwhelmed; the surge did not happen; and the Nightingale facility has been stood down. Our economy is in free fall. What are we waiting for? Is it the foot-draggers in the Executive?

Mr Swann: I will respond, first, to the member's opening comments about the Smyth family, who are going through a particularly harrowing time. For any family, losing a mother and child in a horrific accident is tragic, and another child is relying on the support our National Health Service. It is a completely challenging time for the family and for the wider North Antrim community. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and in support of the National Health Service. It is doing what it does well in supporting the family and getting as much medical assistance as possible to them.

On where we move next, the member will be aware that the plan published only recently sets out the series of steps to be taken and the measures that will be used at each point. The first step is the control of transmission — as he rightly indicates, maintaining the R number at below 1 — and protecting our healthcare capacity. He is right: our systems were not overwhelmed, and we have stepped down the Nightingale facility. However, that decision was not taken lightly. The number of people in ICUs and the number of hospital admissions were such that there was still concern. When it comes to easing restrictions, we will do it at the appropriate time. My feeling is that we will do

it and that announcements will come from the Executive shortly. However, we do it out of necessity. In taking those decisions, we will make sure that we retain the restrictions only for as long as is necessary, as all Executive parties have made clear. I think the member's point was that we should rely on the evidence. The scientific advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser also guides those decisions.

Mr Allister: The Minister did not tell us what the R number is currently. May I hurl a question at him from this commodious ditch? On Tuesday, in the Assembly, the deputy First Minister pontificated that if and when we got the R number down to 0.5, we could move forward. Is she following different science or is that the advice to the Executive? Is it the collective Executive view that it has to be down to 0.5 before there is substantial movement? Miss O'Neill is not entitled to her own science, surely, within this Executive.

Mr Swann: Apologies, Jim; it was not deliberate. The Chief Scientific Adviser informed us this morning that the R number is around 0.7. I have seen no documentation or target that suggests that we will need an R number of 0.5 before we move to step one.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. He mentioned the strain on services for our people. I want to bring John Price to his attention. I met John many years ago at a protest and have been on many protests with him. He has been a teacher for many years in my constituency and has had his oral cancer surgery withdrawn as part of the coronavirus measures. Will the Minister's Department do all that it can to assist him with his medical procedures at this time?

The Minister said that Stormont has failed the NHS for many years. I would absolutely concur with that. A number of issues are emerging about care homes, particularly with infections and deaths and the fact that more and more public finances seem to be going into for-profit private care homes. The Minister mentioned that a paper on care homes is going to the Executive. Is now the time to begin the planning and implementation of a strategy to bring care homes into public ownership?

Mr Swann: I cannot promise anything, but if the member wants to give me details about his first point, we will have a look at them.

The road map is already there for where we go on care homes. It was published in this place. It is called 'Power to People', and it laid out a number of very specific steps and proposals to reboot adult care and support in Northern Ireland. We published it a number of years ago, but it has lain ineffective and action has not been taken on it. It is now up to us to take that document, grasp it and start to deliver on what it proposed and envisaged as a reboot of adult care support in Northern Ireland.

We have seen what we have been able to do with preparation for the surge of COVID-19. We have seen how agile the health service can be and how supportive the entire Executive can be. The challenge now is doing that at haste and with speed to make sure that we get our care homes and social services into that position as well.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answers and appreciate his comments on my first question. I will forward the details to his office.

My recollection of the Health Committee's briefing on the 'Power to People' report in, I think, January, was that Sean Holland seemed to suggest — he certainly did not rule it out — that there was a need for measures to have greater public involvement in the roll-out of care. I do not want to misquote him, but that was my recollection of what he said. I urge the Minister to ensure that that is a fundamental part of the paper that he presents to the Executive. People are coming out and are clapping correctly for our NHS. We have been told that there is provision from the cradle to the grave. That needs to exist and a public role is essential in delivering that.

Mr Swann: The member makes the point that highlights the greatest points of our National Health Service. It is free from the cradle to the grave, free at the point of use and free at the point of delivery. We must make sure of that.

We have looked at the interactions that we as a Department, Executive and a state have had to put into some of the private care providers with staffing, PPE and general support. We have to play a greater role in care home provision going forward.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Thank you, Minister.

Item 4 on the agenda is the time, date and place of our next meeting. We have yet to receive confirmation from the Executive about when Ministers will next come to make statements to the Committee. As soon as that confirmation has been received, written notification of the time, date and place of our next meeting will be issued to members in the usual way.

I remind members that a plenary sitting of the Assembly is scheduled to take place on Tuesday 19 May and that Ministers may continue to make oral statements to the Assembly on sitting days.

That concludes today's meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. Stay safe and God bless.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

14 May 2020

Ministerial Statement: Justice

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Mr Doug Beattie
Mr John Blair
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Alan Chambers
Ms Linda Dillon
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Paul Givan
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mrs Naomi Long
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Andrew Muir
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr Jim Wells
Miss Rachel Woods

Witnesses:

Mr Peter May Department of Justice

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I welcome members to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

Agenda item 1 is the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on 7 May. Members are asked to note the minutes of proceedings, which Mr Beggs has agreed. Members should also note that the Minutes of Evidence from that meeting have been published in the Official Report, which is available on the Committee's web page.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the Minister of Justice. The Speaker received notification on 11 May that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to deliver is included in your pack at page 7. I welcome Mrs Naomi Long, the Minister of Justice, to this meeting of the Committee. I also welcome Mr Peter May, the permanent secretary in the Department of Justice, who accompanies the Minister today.

Before the Minister makes her statement, I remind members that, following it, there will be an opportunity to ask questions, not to make speeches. Members who ask short, sharp, focused questions will be invited to ask a supplementary question if they wish to do so. Members who engage in lengthy preambles may find that they will not get to put a question or, at least, a supplementary. That approach has been taken at the Ad Hoc Committee over recent weeks and has generally worked well. Therefore, I intend to continue that approach today. However, it is important that I get cooperation from members, and I will, of course, ask the Minister to give succinct answers as well.

I invite the Minister to make her statement, which should be heard by members without interruption.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I believe that I was the first Minister to take general questions from the Assembly on COVID-19, back in March. Since then, I have engaged with Members on a range of other business, including the Second Reading of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, and so I very much welcome the opportunity to return to the Chamber today specifically to update members on my Department's ongoing response to the pandemic.

It has been 10 weeks since the first case of COVID-19 was identified here, and we are now in week 8 of lockdown. It would be difficult to overstate how much life has changed for all of us in that time. For some of us, that has been a change to our working patterns and social lives; for others, the change has been more permanent and profound. My thoughts are particularly with all those who have lost loved ones at this time, whether through COVID-19 or otherwise. It is never easy to lose someone we love, but even the small comforts that we can usually draw from those final moments in their company, the sense of love and support from being borne up by family and friends in our grief and the ability to pay a tribute to them with those who knew them have been denied to many families in these unprecedented circumstances. I know that, as a community, we will want to find a way to pay our respects and to acknowledge our loss when this is over.

I will come on to the work of my Department shortly, but I would first like to take the opportunity to acknowledge that lockdown is not easy. Being apart from our family, our friends and our support networks, especially at a time of crisis, is unnatural for us. It is not something that would

be mandated by government except in the most extreme circumstances — such as the biggest public health emergency in living memory — and it is not something that we should sustain for any longer than is absolutely necessary. It is a measure that has been taken to save lives, but I also recognise that, in the process, it has turned many lives upside down. The economic challenge that we now face is real, but just as real is the challenge to rebuild our relationships, our families and our communities as we move forward. I hope that the Executive's planned way forward for easing lockdown, which was published on Tuesday of this week, goes some way not only to illustrate that there is light at the end of the tunnel but to reassure people that the sacrifices that we have made to date, though challenging and difficult, have slowed the spread of the virus and saved lives.

I pay tribute to everyone in the health service and all the key workers across our community who are on the front line, caring for our sick and vulnerable, working to keep our communities clean and safe, securing our critical infrastructure and ensuring that we have food in our cupboards. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to everyone who is playing their part to keep people safe and healthy throughout the pandemic.

I am enormously proud of the staff in my Department, who have been working hard to protect and sustain vital public services in such challenging circumstances. My focus and that of my Department have been on ensuring that key services are maintained, that staff and those in our care are protected and that public safety is preserved. The Department was quick to organise its response, and, within days of the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic, we had stood up both our departmental operations centre and our business continuity arrangements. Both have worked well in providing evidence and analysis to support quick and clear decision-making and in identifying issues that require escalation to the Executive Office or the civil contingencies group.

The Department has also played a key role in the Executive's strategy for dealing with COVID-19. We have two work streams in the strategy. The first is ensuring the continued safety of custodial environments. Achieving that has taken a significant effort by a large number of people. I pay tribute to all staff in the Prison Service and in the Youth Justice Agency. A range of infection control measures has been put in place in custodial environments, including precautionary isolation for new committals, of which there were 198 in the month of April, and the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff. New committals are now being tested for COVID-19 as part of the committal process.

The reduction of footfall in prisons through the suspension of visits and the introduction of virtual visits have helped, as has the temporary release of prisoners. So far, approximately 142 prisoners due for release over the next three months have been released under the scheme. Notwithstanding those releases, however, our prison population remains at almost 1,400. Taken together, the measures have meant that only one prisoner in our care has tested positive for COVID-19, and it is important to note that that individual tested positive in the community before their committal to custody. Six prison officers have tested positive for COVID-19; five were tested more than four weeks ago, and one tested positive earlier this week.

Our thoughts are with them and their families as they continue their recovery.

Our second work stream in the Executive strategy is to make arrangements to respect the dignity of the deceased. That has involved two main actions for the Department. The first was to establish additional mortuary capacity through the development of a temporary resting place at Kinnegar, which, as I have said previously, is something that I could never have anticipated having to plan for in my political career. Staff in my Department, as well as partners and contractors, worked extremely hard to develop the site in a very short time. It was handed over from contractors at the end of April. It is an excellent facility but one that, I hope, we never need to use. Should it ever be needed, the PSNI has agreed to lead on its day-to-day operations. I am grateful to the Chief Constable for his willingness to undertake that role. The second action was to ensure that funeral directors had enough personal protection equipment. Despite some initial difficulties, that situation is improving, and sufficient PPE is now available for them.

While the work on prisons and on the temporary resting place is significant, it would be very remiss of me not to mention the excellent work that has taken place more widely. Staff throughout the Department have risen to the challenges and have quickly reorganised and found new ways of ensuring that key services continue to operate. A good example is the Courts and Tribunals Service, where business has been concentrated in five venues and is delivered in a range of creative ways, making the best use of IT and rota systems to ensure social distancing. That has meant that the volume of court business has reduced, and that has had an impact on the legal profession. In response, last week I introduced the interim payment scheme to provide earlier payment of legal aid fees due to solicitors and barristers. That is intended to protect their cash flow and to help to ensure that there is a viable legal aid supplier base at the end of the pandemic in order to safeguard access to justice.

I am really pleased that, as well as continuing to deliver key public services, staff have been able to continue delivering on a number of other priorities, such as the domestic abuse Bill. The Bill and the need for such legislation have been brought into stark relief in recent days. Whilst many of us see home as a safe place, for those affected by domestic abuse or violence it is often the place where they are most vulnerable to their abuser. Those already at risk have found themselves cut off from their normal support networks. In those circumstances, the vulnerability and risk of harm is even greater. Information from police indicates an increase in the reporting of incidents during the COVID-19 lockdown of almost 10%. Calls to the 24-hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline for the most recent week were around 35% higher when compared with the average weekly calls level during February. In addition to bringing forward the Bill, my Department and our partners are taking more immediate action to address the issue and to ensure that support is available and key needs are met. Some of those measures require a multi-agency operational response. That is being led by the PSNI, which, along with statutory and voluntary sector partners, meets on a weekly basis to co-ordinate action. As part of that, PSNI is engaging with 1,200 of the highest-risk victims. A dedicated team is also contacting lower- and medium-risk victims who are reporting abuse and providing them with signposting to key services and

support. Greater public awareness is also important, and I have relaunched the 'See the Signs' media campaign, promoting available support routes for victims as well as encouraging police reporting. It is running on TV, radio and social media until 20 May and complements the police's 'Behind Closed Doors' social media campaign, which launched at the beginning of the lockdown period.

There has been much in the local and national media on the issues of PPE and testing. We have had a clear focus from the beginning on ensuring that our front-line staff are adequately protected. The Prison Service has worked hard to secure PPE, and sufficient supplies continue to be available. We monitor stocks across front-line areas of the Department, as well as in the PSNI, very regularly, and sufficient supply is there. Testing has been available for front-line staff who need it from 7 April, and testing capacity has since been ramped up further. That is very welcome.

I also pay tribute to the PSNI, who have played a key role in policing the coronavirus restriction regulations brought forward by the Health Minister to limit the community transmission of COVID-19. As I said previously, I believe fundamentally in personal freedom, but I also believe in personal responsibility. If people will not take responsibility for their actions, they must be held responsible, and I am grateful to the PSNI for their key role in those difficult circumstances.

We are not yet out of the woods, and, therefore, we need to proceed with caution and care. The "Stay at home" message remains in place for us at this point. Nonetheless, as the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced on Tuesday, it is right that we think ahead and plan for the next stage in a careful and considered way. Like others, my Department has started work on recovery planning. Our aim will be to manage a gradual return to more normal levels of operation, while making sure that we retain some of the positive ways of working that have been introduced in response to the current situation. Our recovery plan will take into account public health advice and the need to deliver important public services in the best way that we can. I am grateful to the Department's staff and all our partners for the positive contribution that they have made in helping to keep Northern Ireland safe and for the delivery of important public services during these most unusual and unprecedented times.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for her statement. Before I invite members to ask their questions, I must say that this is the first time that Ms Linda Dillon has been in the Chamber since the outrageous threats were made against her person. On behalf of the whole House, I want to say that we condemn those responsible and stand in solidarity with you.

I will allow a period of around an hour for questions. I remind members of what I said at the start of the meeting, which is that they should not preface their question with a speech or a statement. There will be an opportunity for supplementary questions, but that will be dependent on members abiding by those conditions.

Mr Givan (Committee Chair - Committee for Justice): At the outset, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I associate myself with your condemnation of the threats that have been issued against the Deputy Chair of the Justice Committee and, indeed, two other members of the

Committee — Doug Beattie and Patsy McGlone — and Steve Aiken, another Member of the House. I condemn that threat utterly and say to those members that they have my support in carrying out their role. Similarly, I condemn the threats that were made against journalists, and I give my support to the important work that they do in carrying out their job.

I associate myself with the Minister's remarks in paying tribute to those in her Department and all of the agencies involved in the criminal justice system for the ongoing work that they are carrying out in their response to COVID-19. I am pleased that the Minister came to the House today. We suggested that she bring the statement to the Ad Hoc Committee after we called her to appear before the Justice Committee. I was disappointed that it was deferred from last week and that the Justice Committee was not advised of that deferral. Nevertheless, the Minister is here now.

In her statement, the Minister referred to "lockdown" on numerous occasions. So far, approximately 142 prisoners have been released, and a number of those had to be returned to prison for various breaches. Will the Minister advise us on whether that number has gone up, whether there is any intention to release more prisoners, or whether, given the improving situation in the Prison Service, prisoners who have been temporarily released might be returned to prison to fulfil their custodial sentence?

Mrs Long: I thank the Chairman of the Justice Committee for his comments. To clarify, my statement was postponed from last week to facilitate a statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which, then, did not take place. It was postponed as a courtesy to them because they intended to make a statement to the House.

Under the terms of the early release scheme, 142 individuals have been released. Eight individuals were subsequently arrested, charged and returned to custody. It is worth noting that, during that period, a number of those individuals had not committed additional offences but had simply varied from the terms and conditions of the curfew that was attached to their release. The majority of prisoners who were released have now seen out their sentence and their time served, and so they will not be recalled at this time. However, those who were recalled will go through the normal process. If they were caught doing something potentially illegal and there were any alleged offences, they will go through the courts in the normal way. Obviously, it would not be appropriate for me to prejudge the outcome of the court process.

As to whether further release will be needed, we do not have an improving situation as regards attendance at work in the Prison Service. At the moment, the situation is fairly static. That is not because large numbers of people are self-isolating due to symptoms but is reflective of the fact that many of the officers are unable to attend work due to their own vulnerabilities. Some are shielding or living with those who are shielding and so are unable to return to work. Testing, therefore, will have some impact on return-to-work capability but not, perhaps, as much as people would have hoped to reduce the overall numbers of people who cannot attend work on a regular basis.

As I have said before, we will have to consider in due course what options are still available to us to maintain a good ratio between prison officers and those who are

committed to our care. It is worth bearing in mind that, during this period, there have been significant committals to the prison system, so it should not be assumed that numbers are dropping due to release when we have significant committals, either on remand or as a result of cases passing through the courts. So, we need to take all of that in the round and make those judgements at the appropriate time.

Mr Givan: The police will play a critical role in the various steps for moving forward that have been outlined by the Executive. What assurances can the Justice Minister give us that, in the policing of these regulations — as they will need to be amended going forward — all the decision-making processes will be quality assured so that we do not have a repetition of what happened at the start of the process, when the police needed to introduce a system to check that penalties that were issued were appropriately carried out?

I agree with the Minister on this issue: social responsibility and personal responsibility is where the focus needs to be. Policing and regulating ourselves out of this crisis will not be the most successful way. It is about all of us, individually and collectively, acting with social responsibility.

Mrs Long: I want to unpack a number of things in that question. First of all, I do not accept the Chairman's characterisation of the police's response, in the initial phases or since, in the way that he has presented it. Secondly, it is an operational matter for the police to decide how they choose to undertake their responsibilities in respect of the regulations, and it is not my responsibility, as Justice Minister, to oversee the operational decisions, nor, indeed, is it the role of the House to do so. It is a matter for the Policing Board to scrutinise the choices and decisions of the Chief Constable and his senior team.

Finally, as in all things, with great freedom comes great responsibility. As we increase the level of freedom for people to return to their normal lives, they will also have to assume more and more responsibility for their individual choices. It is hugely important that the road map set out by Executive this week did not simply set out a series of things that people could do but it set out a rationale on which people could start to apply, in their own circumstances, how to judge the safety, or otherwise, of the choices that they are making. There will, of course, still be a role for enforcement but it is also worth recognising that enforcement is the fourth "E", not the first "E" that the police use when they are dealing with these regulations. As other bodies and sectors come into play, as we move forward, other agencies will also have to take responsibility with engaging, educating, encouraging and, indeed, enforcement, whether that be in the workplace, other sectors or, on some occasions, fall to the police to continue to fulfil that role.

Ms Dillon (Committee Deputy Chair - Committee for Justice): I thank the Principal Deputy Speaker for his kind comments at the beginning of the session. I would also like to show solidarity with the other members who were threatened and, as outlined by the Chair, the journalists who were initially threatened. Everybody should be able to go about their daily work. You do not have to agree with everything that we think, say or do, but we are entitled to think, say and do it, as is everyone, without fear of

intimidation. I appreciate the comments and support from across the House. Thank you.

I thank the Minister for her statement. The Department's briefing paper on the legal aid COVID-19 interim payment scheme outlined that there would be no additional costs associated and that it would be dealt with and administered from within the existing legal aid budget. We understand the reasons why you need it; I support those reasons and the Committee supported them because we want people to have access to justice. It is extremely important that all those things are kept in place, just like all other businesses. At the other end of this, we want to see that justice can still be served and that people can still get access to it. However, we have since learned, from the Department of Finance's breakdown, that there is £0.9 million additional cost for that scheme. Can the Minister provide some detail on the discrepancy in the information that was provided to the Committee?

Mrs Long: Firstly, can I add my condemnation to that which has already been expressed in the Chamber for the absolutely disgraceful intimidation that you and other members, including Doug Beattie, Patsy McGlone and, indeed, one of my colleagues, have been subjected to. It is completely unacceptable but it shows the desperation of those who not only want to silence the press and its scrutiny but want to silence politicians who are willing to stand up for the freedom of the press. It is a sign of that desperation and it is an appalling situation that anyone thinks, in this day and age, that there is any acceptable level of threat or violence.

On legal aid, we did not say, in fairness, that it would not cost anything more, because we cannot make that prediction. We said that there was some risk attached. For example, if someone has to change their legal counsel on the way through a case, there was, obviously, a risk that some of those payments would have been made and that there may be a need to recoup or rebalance that. There will always be a little bit of uncertainty in any of these schemes but we tried to operate a scheme that fell within the original budget, in that legal aid payments are being made early, as opposed to additional. So, in order to aid cashflow, people are being paid for work that they would have been doing and will be doing in the future, as opposed to being granted money in addition to the legal aid payments that they would have received. As you will appreciate, legal aid is also unpredictable because it is demand-led, as opposed to us being able to dictate where the legal aid payments will come from.

If it is helpful, I am happy to ask the permanent secretary to home in on the differential with the Department of Finance figures. On the overall package, however, we do not see its becoming a burden on the Executive's Budget in the longer term.

Mr Peter May (Department of Justice): Thank you, Minister. The legal aid interim payment scheme is paying only for work that has already been done by solicitors and barristers. As the Minister indicated, we had to identify what the total potential risk would be in the event that some of those firms or individuals no longer continued to trade, even despite the interim payment scheme. I have not seen the specific piece of paper to which the member referred, but I think that the £0.9 million was a maximum figure. We would anticipate its being significantly less than that in practice. That would be the only additional

potential cost, because it could be that, as a solicitor or barrister ceases to trade, somebody might bring in another representative and, then, have to rerun some aspects of the case that way.

Ms Dillon: Thank you. In relation to access to justice, it has been reported to me by some of the separated prisoners and their legal representatives that there are issues with them getting access to their legal representatives. Many of those issues relate to not having the same access to virtual contact in the separated regime than in the main prison. What is being done or can be done about that? Ronnie Armour has highlighted that the Prison Service would like virtual contact to remain in place going forward. If it does remain, it is important that it is in place right across the prison regime.

Mrs Long: Continued access to people's legal representatives is absolutely essential. I must say that I was not aware that there was a particular issue with respect to the separated regime. It has not been raised with me before today. As it has been raised with me, I will raise it with Ronnie Armour and ask him for more information. You will appreciate that virtual visiting and contact requires people to move around the prison, and there are limitations on how much people can do that safely at this particular time due to the need to control the viral spread. In order to keep people safe, we have to strike a balance. I was not aware of there being a specific issue, nor of its having been raised. I must say that other issues that were raised have been resolved very quickly. I will endeavour to get back to you as quickly as possible with an answer and, hopefully, also with a solution.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Justice Committee got a bit of leeway. We are 13 minutes into the meeting, and four questions have been answered. Seventeen other members wish to ask questions. That means that we have 34 questions to go, and we have got around one hour. I would like there to be pointed questions and pointed answers. We are about to get a wonderful example of that from Mr Daniel McCrossan. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCrossan: I am always singled out. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I want to join you and colleagues to condemn the threats that have been made against colleagues in the Chamber. There is no place for such threats in society. I know that it will strengthen the resolve of the House and parties to work together to eradicate such threats from society.

I welcome the Minister's statement and her actions to date, especially to bring forward the important and long-overdue Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill to protect many people in society. She mentioned the PSNI's actions during lockdown and the pressures that exist. Can she comment on the recent news reports that allege that PSNI officers in Strabane and Derry were absent from their posts and missed their shifts? Can she outline whether a full and impartial investigation is under way on the matter?

Mrs Long: On the second question, I can confirm that a full investigation is under way. On that basis, I cannot comment further because it would be wrong for me to prejudge the outcome of that investigation, which has been commissioned by the Chief Constable.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I know that she will appreciate the seriousness of the allegations,

which are now on public record and will concern many people. Can she assure the House that the investigation will be impartial and thorough, and will give clear conclusions on those matters and whether, in the absence of PSNI officers in the community, no one was left wanting when it came to tackling the issues that they might have faced throughout that period of absence?

Mrs Long: There are assurances that I can give. I can give the assurance that I know from my discussion with the Chief Constable that he takes the matter seriously. I therefore imagine that he as much as anyone else will want to see it properly investigated and dealt with thoroughly. The nature of the investigation, how it proceeds and its outcome are all really a matter for the Chief Constable and will, no doubt, be looked into further by the Policing Board, which is the appropriate scrutiny mechanism for such issues.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for her detailed statement. I join her in showing huge appreciation for the Prison Service, which, in many cases, has been forgotten about during the crisis. That we have had only one prisoner and only six staff test positive for COVID-19 is testimony to its dedication and its work.

I will extrapolate from the figure, if I may. One prisoner has tested positive, but how many prisoners have been tested for COVID-19? Six staff have tested positive, but how many of our staff in total have been tested for COVID-19? Even a percentage will do if we do not have a figure.

Mrs Long: We started testing staff only in April, as a result of discussions that I had with the Health Minister, who helped us to bring it forward. I am not able to give you the numbers; I do not have access to them at the moment. Testing is done on the basis of the advice that comes from the Department of Health, which is that anyone who has symptoms ought to go and be tested, and that advice will be applied in exactly the same way in a prison population as it is applied in the population outside. Therefore, any prison officers who are symptomatic or concerned about their health or are concerned that they or their family may have been exposed to the virus are now able to access checking. Anyone who is symptomatic is, as you know, placed in isolation in order to ensure that, if people show signs that may suggest COVID-19 such as a temperature or another symptom, they are not in the main prison population and are therefore not putting others at risk. Those Prison Service units are properly serviced, with staff in full PPE, ensuring that they are not further exposed to the virus when working in that environment.

Mr Beattie: Minister, you will understand where I am coming from. Prisons are a micro-society in many ways. They are enclosed, but they are not isolated. There is still a lot of footfall and movement within a prison. To give us a real understanding of how the disease is moving through our prisons and our Prison Service, it is important to understand what the percentage is of people being tested.

I am being lobbied an awful lot at the moment about the training courses that are going on in the prisons. They have continued. The participants in one course have now been sent home, because one of the trainees has tested positive for COVID-19, and the course has been stopped. I do not know about the second course. It would be interesting to find out where we are at with it. Staff at Hydebank Wood, where the course —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Question.

Mr Beattie: — was taking place, are concerned that they have mixed with individuals who have it and have now been sent home. Can you give us any assurance about how we are dealing with that?

Mrs Long: I can certainly assure you that we did not take lightly the decision to continue with training officers. However, if we are to ensure that there is a constant flow of officers into the system, as there is a constant flow of officers out of the system due to retirement and other things, we have to continue to train new officers to be able to deploy them in our prisons. Otherwise, we would have a much more significant problem with the ratio of officers to those in our care.

On the matter of the trainee who has contracted COVID-19, the normal procedures have been put in place. Those who were close to that individual have been offered the option of being tested. The procedures are therefore in place, as recommended by the Department of Health. Remember: it is not for me as Justice Minister to decide what the appropriate level of testing is; it is a matter for the Health Minister to advise the Department on how to test prisoners and prison officers in the system.

To ensure that our custodial environments are maintained safely, we introduced, as you know, restricted, house-based regimes and proportionate social distancing measures. We restricted movement in access. You mentioned that it is not a closed system, but although it is not an entirely closed system, it is much more closed than it was before the pandemic. We have shielded older and vulnerable prisoners. We have isolated anyone who is symptomatic, and we have 14-day isolation for all new committals. We reduced doubling up, stopped face-to-face visits from 23 March and we also suspended temporary release and working in the community schemes.

We have the early release scheme, as you already know. We have closed learning and skills units. We have increased allowances to try to support prisoners' television access and telephone credits, in order to assist them with their occupation during the day. We have increased cleaning and the use of PPE in line with WHO and Public Health Agency guidance. We are testing symptomatic prisoners and staff, and their family members, in line with the defined criteria provided by the Department of Health.

We are doing all that we can. I have to say, it is a tribute to how effective prison management has been that we can count on two hands the number of people who have tested positive within the system, whether that be those who are working or those who are resident. When you contrast that to other residential settings, I think we have done a pretty good job. That is not to be complacent, because there could be an outbreak within the prison system at any time, and we are absolutely alert to that.

Mr Blair: I start by associating myself and my party with the condemnation, as stated, of those despicable threats against politicians and journalists. We say to all those at the receiving end of those threats that we stand with you.

As a member of the Policing Board, I am aware that PSNI enforcement of the coronavirus regulations is not the responsibility of the Minister. She recognises the operational independence of the Chief Constable. Does the Minister agree that we need to see individual

responsibility and common sense in relation to the regulations and, crucially, in addition to that, consistent messaging from all Departments and Ministers?

Mrs Long: I thank my colleague for his question, and I absolutely agree that we cannot expect the police to police our living rooms, back gardens and aspects of our private lives. We have to take responsibility for our own health, for that of those around us and also for the spread of this disease in the community. As I said earlier, as we get more and more freedom to move, go to work and do all the things that we want, we are going to have to take more responsibility for making those difficult choices. Therefore, it is important that, as an Executive, we present people with clear, concise and easily understood information and guidance and consistent advice, so that people feel confident in the decisions they take.

This has been an unsettling time. People are frightened about the risk to themselves and their families. They desire to go back to work and spend time with their friends, but they are fearful about the impact that might have on their health and that of those around them. We need to give people confidence and assurance so that they feel able to make informed decisions about their behaviour, in a way that will not jeopardise the progress we have made.

Mr Blair: Following on from the impacts of coronavirus, the Minister will be aware that my constituent, Fiona Jamieson, and her daughter, Ciara Hindman, bravely went public about the impacts of stalking. I have made reference to that before. Can we have reassurance that the introduction of legislation on stalking has not been adversely impacted by COVID-19?

Mrs Long: I was fortunate enough to meet both Fiona and Ciara before this pandemic and to talk with them about their experiences, not only with respect to stalking, but also the response of the various parts of the justice system. That further informed my commitment to bring forward stalking legislation in the autumn.

Obviously, all Departments are under pressure in juggling the various responsibilities that they have, both in terms of the pandemic and their wider responsibilities. As you are aware, we were able to make good progress with respect to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which is now with the Committee for its attention. We have now moved to drafting the legislation that we hope to bring forward on stalking, along the same timeline that we had originally intended.

I hope that we will be able to continue with that piece of work and, with the Committee's permission and cooperation, be able to introduce it in the autumn.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she recognise the need for a review in relation to attendance at funerals? My understanding is that the public are confused about whether standing out and paying respects in the street, obviously while adhering to social-distancing regulations, is a reasonable thing to do. We need clarification on that. I also understand that nowhere in the legislation is the number 10 specified in relation to attendance at graveyards. Perhaps we can get some further clarification on those issues, which are highly sensitive and emotive. In Northern Ireland, thankfully, people have respect for the dead.

Mrs Long: First and foremost, I have to say that I think I recognised in my opening remarks that it has been an incredibly difficult period for those who have lost a loved one, whether through COVID-19 or any other disease, to not be able to draw on the support of family and friends at the time, to have to grieve in isolation and to not be able to give people a proper send-off, for want of a better way of putting it. It is very difficult, and particularly so in a community where our form of grieving tends to be very much a communal and community-led one, not just about immediate family but about friends and the extended community, the church community and our other connections. It is very difficult. Unfortunately, however, I cannot provide you with guidance, because ultimately the regulations, and the clarification of those regulations, falls to the Department of Health. You would need to raise with the Health Minister what changes to the regulations, if any, would be required.

However, the road map set out by the Executive earlier this week gave some indication of, for example, the size and scale of outdoor gatherings that we might be able to reach at different stages in this process. We have also given some indication of indoor gatherings — all, obviously, contingent on appropriate social distancing. In the interim, the message remains as it was, which is to try to abide by the advice given and to bear in mind the importance of protecting the living as well as respecting the dead.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Minister. As was mentioned earlier, a common-sense approach is important. My final point is in relation to the crematorium. I am sure you are very aware of the issue. Again, it is a highly sensitive issue that no member of the public is allowed into the chapel. Perhaps that issue needs to be reviewed urgently, Minister. I think that small numbers would be reasonable.

Mrs Long: Again, this is really a matter for Belfast City Council, which operates the crematorium, but I do have some insight to the rationale behind the current process, so I am happy, whilst not speaking on the council's behalf, to give you some indication of why the limitations are there; I think it is an issue area that is poorly understood.

We have a very small staff in the crematorium, and there is only one crematorium facility in Northern Ireland. Given the risk of excess deaths and the possibility that they would have come under significant pressure, and also the risk to the staff who work in the crematorium from exposure to COVID-19 — some of the staff are shielding or have family who shield — there was a concern at the outset that the crematorium's operations could be compromised were people to attend the crematorium and have contact with the staff. Potentially, the staff might not then be able to operate the crematorium. The risk, of course, is that, with very small numbers, it also takes a significant time to train someone to operate a crematorium — that can take upwards of a year.

So, there was an issue about trying to ensure that we had the right capacity to deal with cremations as and when required. That was similar to the concerns about protecting cemetery staff, because they tend to operate on quite a small staff. I think that, as we move out of this phase, that will obviously be open for review, but that is the background to it. I do not think that, in any sense, shape or form, people were unaware of how difficult it would be. I do know people who attended the crematorium and found it incredibly distressing to be turned back at the gate

while their loved one made their last journey alone. That is difficult for people, but there was a clear logic behind why it had to be done. I hope that we will not be in that situation in perpetuity.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. You have stated previously that you would cooperate with the Minister for Communities and other Executive colleagues to put additional measures in place to support victims of domestic abuse during COVID-19. Can you outline specifically what work has been done to ensure adequate provision of emergency accommodation for victims who need it?

Mrs Long: I thank the member for her question. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on emergency accommodation because that falls entirely within the remit of the Department for Communities. However, we have met the Minister for Communities, we have met the First Minister and deputy First Minister and I have supported a number of bids from the Department for Communities for additional funding that is needed in order that accommodation can be provided.

It is also important that accommodation is sustained beyond the immediate crisis, so, for example, there were opportunities through closed guest houses and closed hotels to provide temporary accommodation — but only on a very temporary basis. The important thing for us was finding continuity of supply so that, when people move away from a domestic abuse or violent situation, they find themselves with appropriate accommodation.

On the work that we have been able to do, the police are monitoring high-risk victims and providing them with the signposting necessary so that they can access key services and support. The helpline that we are jointly involved with funding with the Department for Communities has a range of measures in place to deal with the increase in calls that it is receiving at this time and also its ability to pass them on.

The police lead the multi-agency operational response in the voluntary and community sector, so accommodation is a particular focus for them. They have been working with the Department for Communities because some increased accommodation has been secured. The other area of work that has started is with the Department for Infrastructure. Minister Mallon and I met yesterday to discuss the possibility of extending emergency transport to those who need to leave a situation using our public transport network.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): You do not have to ask a supplementary question. Would you like to ask one?

Ms C Kelly: I have just a short one.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): That is grand.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, I take on board what you have said, but are any particular measures being put in place for victims in rural areas like west Tyrone, where emergency accommodation is in very short supply and a lot of people might live miles and miles from neighbours and friends? Can you outline whether there are any measures in relation to that?

Mrs Long: Obviously, there are particular issues with rurality and how people can access services. Those stand

regardless of the pandemic, but they are exacerbated, I guess, by the fact that people are limited in their ability to move and to access other services in their local community. It is a valid reason, and it was included in the original regulations, to leave your property and to travel for purposes of fleeing domestic abuse or violence. It is also a valid reason for people to leave their home and go to work in the context of providing advice and guidance or working in a hostel, for example, for those who are subject to domestic abuse.

The Minister for Communities is the person who is best placed on the detail on accommodation. I am not directly involved in that, though I do support the Department for Communities in funding the helpline that signposts people to that accommodation once they contact it. We have also looked very carefully at this time, when people may be at home with their abuser, to ensure that other methods other than simply a phone call, such as online chat and email, are available so that people can reach out without having to speak out, because that is not always possible in the confined space of somebody's home where the abuser is present.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I call the next member, I have a housekeeping announcement. The statement from the Minister of Health has been issued in the tabled pack and should be accessible from your devices.

All members so far have availed themselves of the opportunity to ask a supplementary question, but it is not necessary to use them. I call Dr Caoimhe Archibald, and this is no pressure for her not to ask a supplementary question.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her statement today. Minister, a number of constituents have expressed concerns about not being able to access the family court for care arrangements for children. Obviously, there is guidance in place about that, but can the Minister clarify whether she has been lobbied on this issue specifically? What work is being done to ensure social services, family, statutory and voluntary agencies involved in the process know and understand the guidance?

Mrs Long: On access to family courts, as you know the Lord Chief Justice has put in place particular arrangements so that those who need access, for example to change contact arrangements, are able to do so. It is not a simple situation — it is a very stressful one.

Where parental relationships are good and flexibility is shown, you will find that locally agreed arrangements are not open to objection. There is a recognition, for example, that normal contact can continue. If there is shared custody, there is no reason why the child cannot move between parents, and that has all been clarified.

Where there is a pre-existing issue with the relationship between the parents, it becomes much more fraught and difficult. It is primarily because of the use of, for example, contact centres in many of those cases, which is an issue for the Department of Health, which manages family policy and the contact centres. However, where contact arrangements need to be revised, it is possible for that to be done through the court, either through an administrative procedure, where people are willing to agree, or through the legal representatives of the parents.

The bottom line for everyone involved in the system is that the needs and safety of the child are put first. That is always the intention within the family court system and has not changed, though the mechanism of accessing justice has obviously altered during the pandemic.

Mr O'Toole: I will try and be uncharacteristically brief in my questions. I thank the Minister for giving us this update. She correctly said in her remarks that with choice comes responsibility. She is correct to say that about how people approach things as we move through the easing of restrictions. She also said that a lot of police management is an operational matter for the Chief Constable: that is true. However, will she agree, and will she work with him, on a programme of public communication that sets out what the police is doing? A lot of people think the police have been very good at managing the situation since March. They have been judicious, restrained and there has been community buy-in. As much for the police as for anyone else, it is really important that they clearly communicate what they can and cannot do.

Mrs Long: First, I agree and want to thank you as that is reflective of how most people see the police's handling of what is an unprecedented situation. They are policing public health regulations as opposed to public order issues, and that is a rather strange space for the police to find themselves in. However, bluntly, clarity about what people can and cannot do has to come from us as leaders. The role of the police is only to guide people to ensure that they continue to comply with what the Executive have asked.

As we move through the five different stages, it will become less feasible for the police to have an enforcement role and, indeed, less appropriate for them to have that role. People will have to assume more responsibility themselves. However, it is important that, at each stage, the Executive set out very clearly what it is we require of people and what guidance and advice we can offer them. That includes the support and the guidance of the police, because a lot of their work has been about engaging, educating and encouraging, not just enforcement.

Mr O'Toole: Has the Minister had discussions with colleagues on the other side of the border? I know an Garda Síochána and the PSNI are working relatively well together, but there has been an outstanding issue about whether the guards are able to enforce regulations in the Republic. I am not sure precisely what the position is here for residents from the South. It may be that enforcement is less of an issue, but certainly in managing information and people being on the same page, clearly we will very soon, hopefully, have a position where NI residents may go into Donegal. We may even have people coming from the South to shop in the Newry Sainsbury's again. How is the Minister managing this and discussing it with her counterparts?

Mrs Long: There has been a shared understanding and cooperation between an Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland over recent weeks; there has been good engagement. I have also engaged with the Justice and Equality Minister to discuss shared approaches to the bank holiday weekends, for example, which are always testing periods. The message has been clear: if your essential journeys take you across the border, that is fine; there is no problem. You can cross the border as you always did if you live in a border community and

your essential journey takes you across the border. If you live in Strabane and your essential journey takes you to Lifford, that is not a problem. We need to be realistic that that is the case and that no one is trying to stop that happening.

However, if you are on a jaunt for a day out and you think that you can get away with it by going across the border, you will find yourself being turned back by one of the two police services on the island, and that is appropriate. It is about respecting the fact that, as we have contact with different people, and as we move from place to place and from community to community, we increase the risk of carrying the virus with us and spreading it to places where it has not been. We have to approach that with sensitivity, particularly in some of our smaller rural seaside communities who feel under considerable pressure if they get an influx of townies who want to make off for the weekend, buy everything in the shops, put the local services under pressure and, potentially, bring COVID-19 into the village with them. That is how it is going to be perceived. There has to be sensitivity and respect in how that is managed as we move forward.

Mr Chambers: Minister, I concur with the tribute that you paid to the PSNI in your statement. The police had a particularly difficult task at the commencement of the new regulations, especially having to deal with very close scrutiny from some sections of the media. Early concerns were flagged up to me around a lack of PPE for police officers, but I acknowledge that that has been, largely, sorted out. Is the Minister aware of any advice that is in place to maximise social distancing in police vehicles that are deployed in routine patrols, or if that is possible?

Mrs Long: It is incredibly difficult to maximise social distancing in any vehicle, but the Chief Constable has been looking carefully at how people are deployed in order to minimise impact on them. For instance, COVID-19 cars were deployed in each area at the beginning of the outbreak so that if someone was at risk, they could deploy a car with full PPE to deal with the situation as opposed to having every officer equipped. As you will appreciate, whilst PPE provides important protection, it is uncomfortable for those who have to wear it. It is not something that people can wear constantly when driving around, and they cannot do their jobs effectively if they are wearing it all of the time. There are limitations on that.

One of the things that we need to recognise at this time is that full social distancing is not possible, and has not been possible, in all spheres of life. It is the same in prisons. Those of you who have been in prisons, as visitors or otherwise, will be familiar with the constrained environment that we are dealing with; they are quite small areas. Therefore, again, you try to socially distance in a way that is proportionate to the environment that you are in. That is one of the reasons why I pay tribute to those who work on the front line. There are people who, day in, day out, put themselves and their health at risk, albeit a managed risk, in order to enable us to go about relatively normal lives, even in the case of lockdown. We should be very grateful to them for that.

The member mentioned the scrutiny that the police get from the media. After full investigation by the PSNI, I am assured that some of the original stories that emerged in the media do not bear scrutiny to reality. There also has to be a degree of caution on our part that, sometimes, things

that happen in other places suddenly seem to transpose themselves into our situation, and the police are held accountable for things that people have done elsewhere rather than here, perhaps. I am confident that the Chief Constable is making every possible effort to keep officers safe and that there is a constant review of PPE and good supplies of it. We are not going to be complacent about it; we will need it for a long time to come.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): "As visitors or otherwise": if elected politics fails, the diplomatic service definitely beckons for the Minister.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her statement. In closing, you paid tribute to the PSNI who are playing a key role in policing the virus restriction regulations. Since the lockdown, you will be aware of three republican funerals that took place where hundreds of people gathered, blatantly flouting the law and placing other people's lives at risk. As Justice Minister, what is your assessment of the PSNI's response to those incidents?

Mrs Long: Again, I have to say that those are operational matters for the Chief Constable. However, I am aware that, as often happens when large crowds gather, whether it be a public order or, indeed, a public health situation, the police sought to gather evidence on any offences that may have been committed and have continued with their investigations, and I believe that files have been passed to the Public Prosecution Service. It would, therefore, be inappropriate for me to comment on individual cases.

However, a number of members have referred to how difficult it is when someone dies and we are not there and able to have a funeral and to say our last farewell in the way that we would wish, and a lot of families have sacrificed that in order to protect the community around them. They have foregone the right to be able to gather and pay their respects because they believe that protecting their community is important. It compounds their pain when others flout the law in the way that they do and so publicly. It is harmful to anyone to see some behave in a way that is completely contradictory to the way that others have been willing to behave.

I pay tribute to those who have stuck by the regulations, despite how painful it is, for their generosity and graciousness. We owe them a debt of gratitude, too, for curtailing the spread. Those who ignore the regulations are not only being reckless with their own health and the health of those around them, but they are almost definitely ensuring that, by behaving in such a reckless manner, there will be future funerals that they will need to attend. They need to desist and take seriously the advice that has been given about large gatherings.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response. As Justice Minister, have you had any discussions with the Chief Constable around those particular matters?

Mrs Long: With respect to the operational management of such gatherings, it would not be appropriate for me to engage with the Chief Constable, but, in my weekly stocktake with the Chief Constable throughout this, I have sought his advice, guidance and insight into how those are going to be managed.

It is also worth saying that, where there are large funerals anticipated, the police have proactively engaged with communities and talked to families. Many of those families,

on reflection, have sought to reduce the number of people attending and comply with the regulations. Again, it is about engaging and encouraging people to think that, where there may be a risk of harm, they will behave appropriately. However, it is ultimately how it is policed. I think that we all recognise that it would not really do anyone's reputation any good for the police to be seen going in to disrupt a funeral. I think that people would find that difficult, but it is appropriate and proportionate that they collect information about offences and seek to prosecute people if appropriate afterwards.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I call the next member, I should advise that nine more members have indicated that they wish to speak. If I were applying the rules strictly and this were going to last an hour, there would be 12 minutes remaining. That means that people further down the list would not get in. I will do my best to ensure that everyone gets to ask a question, but it is not my intention to keep the Minister here for an hour and a half. I do not think that would be fair. So, can we please focus?

Mr O'Dowd: In regard to the previous question, I think that if Mr Buchanan were being honest with himself and reflecting, he would realise that large funerals have not only taken place among the republican community. In fact, if he were honest with himself, he could think of one very close.

I want to return to the domestic abuse issue. The Minister referred to the increasing calls to the helpline and to the police, which we have to accept is a grave underestimation of the abuse that is going on in society. There is much talk of the economic recovery and the health recovery. Will the Minister outline whether any discussions are taking place in her Department as to how we can help those who suffer domestic abuse at any time — and, certainly, during this period — to recover in the future?

Mrs Long: I thank the member for his question. I also think that it is right to say that there have been gatherings, and not only funerals, in a number of places, and it is right to reflect that all those gatherings, for whatever purpose, are reckless.

On how we recover the justice system, there are a number of things. First and foremost, the support that we offer people during the pandemic will matter. The quality of the advice, support and guidance that we are able to give them at this time, and the ability of people to leave the family home in cases where there is domestic abuse or violence, is hugely important, but we would also expect that there will be a lag in the reporting of this. We know, for example, that often the first signs of domestic or, indeed, sexual violence in the home come when people are at school and changes in behaviour are noted. Many young people are not in that environment now and are not therefore subject to the kind of supervision that they would normally have. I think that we may see a rise in the reporting of quite serious incidents, going forward.

We have to balance that against the fact that we also have some quite significant and serious cases that were in the system. We know, for example, that sexual crime takes a very long time to reach the stage where it enters the courts. That has now been lengthened even further, and yet the attrition rate of witnesses is huge. There are massive challenges. Through the Criminal Justice Board

and working with the Lord Chief Justice, the courts system and others, we are seeking to prioritise those cases, in order that there is a proper plan to move out from this. Leadership on that element through the prosecution of offences will come from the Lord Chief Justice and his staff, but his engagement with other members of the legal profession, the Department and so on has been absolutely critical in planning a way forward.

I do not want to announce anything on behalf of another Minister, but I think that discussions on additional resources for the support and guidance that may be available for those who are more vulnerable at this time are ongoing. More about that will become clear when today's Executive meeting finally concludes.

Mr Muir: The consequences of COVID-19 have put a real strain on public finances. Is the Minister content that sufficient resources have been allocated to her Department and to the justice delivery partners?

Mrs Long: At this stage, all of us are aware of the dual challenge. There will be things that we had anticipated that we would do that we will now not be able to do. There will be other things that we have to do that we did not anticipate having to do. So we will have to balance the finances across both those challenges.

COVID-19, by and large, has been dealt with by the Department of Finance as a separate item to the normal budgeting process, but we have now been asked to engage, along with other Ministers, on a review of our budgets to see where savings could be made and to identify money that will not be spent in this year. It is hugely important that we do not return money to Treasury at a time when we have ongoing pressures within Departments. That is happening right across the Executive, and, when that comes to fruition, we will have much clearer picture of the allocation of resources.

At this point, of course there are pressures within the Department, and we have been very open with the Committee and the Department of Finance about those. Not all of those will crystallise in this year, so I think that it would be inappropriate for us to make requests to the Department of Finance for those at this time. However, where we have required additional resource and have been able to provide a clear case for that, the Department of Finance has responded appropriately.

Mr Muir: Some of that additional resource was provided for the temporary resting place in Kinnegar in my constituency. We obviously hope that that will not be required, but plans were being developed by the council — I will declare that I was previously a member of Ards and North Down Borough Council — to develop a master plan for that area. Will the Minister outline the future intentions for that facility?

Mrs Long: At this stage, no decision has been made about the temporary resting place, but as you will be aware, the site came to the Department as a result of a request for military aid, so it was essentially given to us by the MOD. We will consider options as to whether the facility can be stood down after the crisis or whether it will be retained and how that will be managed. At the moment, we hope that it will not be used, but we are not out of the pandemic yet, so we have to remain in a state of readiness. The police have agreed that if it needs to be stepped up to be used during the pandemic, they are happy and content to

continue to run it. On the longer-term approach, it would be too early to speculate as to how the Executive might want to take that forward, but, as a regional facility for emergency situations, it is probably second to none on these islands.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for her statement. I also want to ask her about domestic and sexual violence. The statement referred to a 10% increase in reports to the PSNI and a 35% increase, in the most recent week, in calls to the 24-hour domestic and sexual violence helpline. Will the Minister detail what additional support her Department will provide to third-sector organisations, such as Hourglass, Women's Aid and the Men's Advisory Project, given their inability to fundraise in their normal or traditional ways? How will their services be assured to be there when they are most needed — when the victims are effectively released and then able to seek the help that they require?

Mrs Long: I thank the member for the question. There has been a slight increase in the reporting of incidents during COVID-19 to the police, but there has been a much more dramatic increase in the number of calls. We need to consider what those calls might entail. For some, it will be seeking advice and guidance on behalf of someone who they are concerned about, rather than as a report of an individual offence or something that has happened, so we need to balance that out. We will not really see the full picture of that for some time. However, by looking to other countries that have been in the lockdown situation, we know that domestic violence has increased. We saw the evidence of that in some of the most violent incidents that have been reported and brought to the attention of the police.

On how we support those organisations, as you know, the Department has a specific role around justice. We jointly fund the helpline and we have ensured that it is able to have the support necessary to be able to continue to train additional staff and so on. The mainstay of its support around advice and counselling, for example, comes from the Department of Health and the other part of its funding around the helpline and its wider remit comes from the Department for Communities.

It is a very complex picture, and I realise, as I stand here, that, most of the time, I stand up and say, "I can answer part of that question, but there are three or four other Ministers involved", which is probably quite frustrating. The reality is that it is a complex landscape, particularly around family law, family justice and domestic abuse, but, on the positive side, it shows that there is good cross-departmental working. That is despite the fact that what we see in the press is very often quite to the contrary on how we are working together and how our relationships are reported. One of the positives that I have seen in this work is the ability of people from all the different party political backgrounds to pull together on the issue.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. Thank you to the Minister for her statement. The statement tells us that 142 prisoners have been released as part of the temporary release scheme. That scheme was set-up on a three-month rolling basis, which means that more prisoners should be due for release next month. Will the Minister tell us whether, in the light of the Executive's exit strategy and the possible easing of restrictions, any changes will be made to the scheme?

Mrs Long: It is my intention to review that again at the end of the month, as I did at the end of last month. That is first of all to judge whether there is a need to continue with the release of prisoners. The decision will have to be balanced, as I said, very carefully, considering, for example, the number of prison officers who are available and the number of prisoners in the system, including new committals. It will need to ensure that a safe balance is maintained in the prison system. It is not something on which I could give a yes or no answer because it will depend on a number of factors that will not become apparent until the point of the review. The scheme has operated successfully. We took swift and decisive action at the beginning, and that has helped us not just to maintain the level of people's health and well-being but to improve morale in the Prison Service and the prisoner population. Things like overcrowding and the lack of a routine regime have an impact on people's mental health and well-being. Being able to reduce the prison population to a point where we can reintroduce some elements of regime to the prison is really important in taking care of people and supporting them in their rehabilitation through the system.

Mr Sheehan: By coincidence, at the Health Committee this morning, we heard Professor Martin McKee, formerly of this parish, talk about institutional amplifiers. That discussion was in the context of what is happening in care homes, but he mentioned that prisons could also be institutional amplifiers. Minister, have you satisfied yourself of the adequacy of preparedness and contingency plans in the event of a serious outbreak of COVID-19 in prisons?

Mrs Long: Yes, I have. I would not want to sound complacent in that regard, because, realistically, when people live at close quarters in densely populated residential settings and a virus enters such a setting, it is incredibly difficult to control. However, I am confident in the measures that have been taken thus far, in that they have protected us. The only prisoner to test positive for COVID-19 was tested before committal. We have not seen anyone in the system, for example, have to be removed because they were seriously ill and required treatment, which indicates that the work done on isolation, deep cleaning and how we have managed the movement of people through the system has been effective in containment, ensuring that COVID-19 has not entered the system and that, where there is risk of entry, that is managed in the proper way. We cannot overstate the risk in those situations, but I am confident that the Prison Service has done all in its power. Whether that is sufficient for members or not, more importantly, the fact that the Prisoner Ombudsman and Criminal Justice Inspection have visited the prisons and satisfied themselves that they are content with how they are operating during this period should reassure those in our care and their families, who may be worried about their health and well-being.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The Minister has now been here for almost five minutes over the hour. I will allow this to run until 2.55 pm, because I see that, outside the Chamber, the Health Minister is waiting to make his statement. I am sorry, folks, but it is what it is.

Mr McNulty: I join fellow members in condemning the threats to my fellow County Armagh native, Miss Linda Dillon. Threats and intimidation from —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr McNulty, no preambles — questions, please.

Mr McNulty: Threats and intimidation were wrong in the past, and they are wrong now.

I thank the Minister for her statement and applaud her for her work in bringing forward legislation to tackle domestic abuse. I also welcome the clarification given to Matthew O'Toole on border communities.

The Minister is responsible for policing and the PSNI. Her statement refers to the key role of policing the coronavirus restrictions regulations.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr McNulty, spit it out.

Mr McNulty: It is coming. The Minister will be aware of the debate in many of our local authorities about the reopening of recycling centres, which are vital to maintaining public health and discouraging the now all-too-common practice of fly-tipping. To date, four local authorities have asked that they be allowed to reopen their centres, and more will follow in the coming days. However, they are waiting to hear from the Minister, the PSNI and the Executive. Can the Minister provide much-needed clarity? Is a trip to the recycling centre to dispose of waste an essential journey? Will it be policed as such?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): OK. The Minister has your question.

Mrs Long: It is not for me to provide that clarity. Guidance to councils is a matter for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and enforcement is a matter for the police.

Mr Butler: The Minister will be well aware that, before COVID, probably the biggest epidemic in prisons was in mental health. The South Eastern Trust provides that care. Is the Minister satisfied that that issue is not being amplified by the COVID threat?

Mrs Long: Mental health is a massive issue. Some 35% of those who come into the prison system have pre-existing mental health conditions, and, in many cases, caring for those people in the system is a huge challenge. We continue to have support from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust that enables us to care for those who are most vulnerable. We also have a range of helplines available, and, particularly during this period, we have introduced things like virtual visiting so that we can maintain people's mental health and well-being through contact with other people.

It is a complex area, but the support is there. One of the reasons that it was so important to reduce the prison population was so that those who are at particular risk can have the proper supervision that is required when their lives may be at risk or in danger.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for coming here today. She noted that testing has been available for front-line staff who need it from 7 April. Will she confirm whom she means by "front-line staff"? Is it anybody in the DOJ family or just those in the Prison Service?

Mrs Long: The date of 7 April in the statement referred to those who are on the front line — for example, in the Prison Service or the Police Service — being able to access that testing. Testing for others in front-line roles, such as those in the Civil Service who are in such a role, is being considered, I think, for roll-out by the Executive.

Mr Allister: Minister, in due course there will be inquests arising from COVID deaths, particularly of health service workers. Can I ask for an assurance that the outrageous direction given by the Chief Coroner in England that coroners should not allow investigations of the quantity or quality of PPE provision and that those matters should not be dealt with in inquests will not apply here? Our system is different, so, as far as it is within your power, will you give an assurance that no such restriction will be placed on our inquests?

Mrs Long: I cannot give you a full assurance on that, because, as you said, I have a limited scope. However, I believe that the purpose of an inquest is to determine the cause of death. What happens beyond that with investigations of negligence, whether criminal negligence or otherwise, is a more complex matter than the determination of the cause of death.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her statement. It was obviously very concerning to hear the reports about the increase in domestic violence —.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Carroll: I was asking a question.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Wells, strictly speaking, this is a Committee meeting rather than a plenary session, so I am not certain that points of order are appropriate, but I will hear your point. You will get to ask your question, Mr Carroll.

Mr Carroll: Thank you.

Mr Wells: As Mr Carroll was making an important point, a member walked in front of him. That is extremely off-putting and rude. Will you rule that that is not acceptable?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Yes, I will. That is not acceptable. The member is right: members should not walk in front of other members when they are speaking. Mr Wells is right, and the rules are clear on that.

Mr Carroll: Thank you. In fairness, I did not notice that, to be completely frank. I was asking my question.

Getting back to my question, it was obviously very concerning to hear reports of the increase in domestic violence and the increase in the number of calls to the 24-hour abuse helpline. Figures are on the rise, but they may not show the full picture, as people may not report incidents out of fear. Has the Department done any work on the feasibility of taking control of empty hotel rooms in this period to support those for whom home is the most dangerous place to be? Belgium and other countries have introduced similar measures. Has any work been commissioned by her Department on that?

Mrs Long: To be clear, it would not be for the Department of Justice to do that, but a number of those issues have been explored in discussions with the Department for Communities.

The wider challenge with that is in ensuring that there is a sustainable way forward for accommodation. If we put people up in temporary accommodation, there is obviously a time limit to that. We need to ensure that there is a flow of permanent accommodation that people can move to

afterwards. I stress again and think it important that I do so that it should not always be those who are subjected to domestic abuse and violence who have to leave the home. It should not be for them to be disrupted in their way of life. There are legal measures in place that people can take to ensure that the abuser is removed from the home. For example, the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive do very good work in creating a sanctuary in the home so that people can remain in their home safely, in their community and with their support networks. That is really vital work that needs to be done, and it is a sustainable way of ensuring that families are not broken up from the people around them because of one abusive person who then manages to inherit the family home.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for coming to the Committee and for making the statement and answering questions. I apologise to people further down the list, particularly my friend from Newry and Armagh, if he thought I was a bit brusque with him, but it is really important that, where you have a Government of five parties, Miss Woods, Mr Allister and Mr Carroll get to ask their questions. I hope that members will forgive me if they thought that I went a bit hard on them.

That concludes questions on the statement. We shall now have a brief suspension of about 10 minutes prior to the statement from the Minister of Health. I remind all members about the importance of maintaining social distancing when leaving the Chamber. The meeting will resume in 10 minutes. Thank you.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

21 May 2020

Ministerial Statement: Education

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Ms Joanne Bunting
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Cara Hunter
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Philip McGuigan
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Justin McNulty
Ms Karen Mullan
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Mervyn Storey
Mr Peter Weir
Mr Jim Wells
Miss Rachel Woods

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members are welcome to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. Agenda item 1 is the minutes of proceedings of the previous meeting, which was held on 14 May. Members are asked to take note of these minutes, which I have agreed. Members should also note that the Minutes of Evidence from that meeting have been published in the Official Report and are available on the Committee's web page.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir. The Speaker received notification on 15 May that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is in your pack at page 7.

I welcome the Minister of Education to this meeting of the Committee. Before he makes his statement, I remind members that, following it, there will be an opportunity to ask questions, not to make speeches. Members who ask short, sharp, focused questions will be invited to ask a supplementary question if they wish, although they are under no obligation. Members who engage in preambles,

however, may find they do not get the opportunity to put a supplementary question. I ask members for their cooperation in this matter. I also ask the Minister for his cooperation in keeping answers short, sharp and focused.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. It is good to see that power has not gone to your head at all. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I do not write the script, Minister. *[Laughter.]*

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

In opening, I express my sincere gratitude to all those who work in the early years, schools, youth and wider education sectors for their vital and ongoing contribution at this very difficult time. We are now in the ninth week of lockdown. In these unprecedented times, the education sector has faced many challenges. In a very short time frame, we have put in place policies and procedures to ensure that we continue to meet the learning needs of our pupils as best we can. Throughout this period, we have prioritised the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and of our staff. Our teachers, school leaders, youth workers and other education partners continue to do an excellent job in supporting our children and young people and their families.

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

Our schools and preschool education settings have remained open to facilitate remote learning and to ensure that there is provision for vulnerable children and for the children of key workers up to the end of year 10. Youth services have also continued to provide support to vulnerable young people. Since Easter, there has been a rise in the number of children attending the schools that remain open and, although the numbers may fluctuate, on average, 450 settings have been open daily, with about 2,000 staff supporting supervised learning for around 1,700 children.

The work of the education sector has continued to focus on six priority areas: pay; free school meals; support for

vulnerable children; distance learning; examinations; and support for key workers. My Department has also worked with the Department of Health in developing the childcare sector support scheme.

Previously, I advised members of a cohort of substitute teachers who were unable to avail themselves of any financial support through any Government schemes related to COVID-19. I have been acutely aware of the concerns of that substitute teaching workforce who no longer have access to secure work. When Her Majesty's Treasury confirmed that those staff were not eligible to be furloughed through the coronavirus job retention scheme, I reiterated the urgent need for funding from the Executive for an income support scheme, which was estimated at around £12 million. On Tuesday, the Executive confirmed that they are to provide part-funding to the scheme of £4 million, and I have reprioritised my 2020-21 Education budget to meet the balance of £8 million. I am delighted to advise members that the Department launched the income support scheme for substitute teachers on Tuesday. The scheme will ensure that eligible substitute teachers, who worked between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2020, will have access to an income for the period April to June 2020. Applications should be made online via the Department's website by Tuesday 26 May.

I turn now to the direct payments scheme that I introduced for families whose children are eligible for a free school meal. Around 55,000 families have received direct payments into bank accounts from the Education Authority (EA) in respect of nearly 99,000 children. However, there were a number of families to whom we could not make direct payments. I am pleased to say that the EA is issuing individual cheques to over 1,600 families for almost 2,500 children, and payments are to be backdated to 23 March 2020. We also have an agreement with the Home Office to make payments to asylum seekers' families through the Aspen card. To date, we have made payments, including backdated payments, to 46 families for 82 children. To date, free school meal payments in the region of £10.7 million have been made in respect of around 101,500 children.

While schools remain closed to the majority of pupils, the EA continues to be unable to provide school meals to children who are entitled to free school meals. A further notice under the coronavirus Act has, therefore, been made today, to renew, for a further period of 28 days, the existing modifications to the legislation that governs school meals. That will allow the EA to continue to make direct payments to parents in lieu of free school meals and ensure that families do not experience hardship during school closures. The numbers continue to rise as more families find themselves eligible for free school meals. The scheme is due to close from 30 June.

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

As part of the voluntary and community sector response, the Education Authority's Youth Service is delivering the Eat Well, Live Well programme, with funding provided by the Executive. It provides healthy meals for 3,100 vulnerable young people who remain at risk of hunger, despite free school meal direct payments. A food box is delivered to each young person's home, each week, and each box contains provision for five breakfasts and five lunches. Demand has been exceptionally high, and the programme reached its maximum capacity within three days of operating. Although the Youth Service has the additional staffing capacity to increase its provision, new registrations and referrals were closed on 29 April in order for the service to remain within its allocated budget. Young people who remain in need are referred to other local food providers, such as food banks, the Department for Communities, local councils and other community-based responses.

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

The Education Authority is providing a weekly report to the Department on the support that it is providing to vulnerable children and young people. From 11 May, it has been providing an additional mechanism, through which social workers and parents or guardians may seek a school place for a vulnerable child. Requests for placement are being processed by health and education professionals. The EA has also established five virtual safeguarding vulnerable children groups, which are aligned with the five health trust areas. The groups ensure that appropriate safeguarding and child-protection referrals are being made. In collaboration with the PSNI, the EA's Youth Service has provided "spaces of sanctuary" for young people at risk of domestic or child abuse.

My Department is also contributing to the Department of Health's cross-departmental vulnerable children action plan. The plan aims to promote the safety and well-being of children and young people within their home and the wider community. A multidisciplinary joint planning process between the Department of Education and the Department of Health for children with complex needs who attend special schools is progressing on a trust-by-trust basis and includes principals of special schools.

I will turn now to school admissions for the next academic year. Primary placement letters issued at the end of April, and post-primary placement letters will issue in June. Open enrolment does not apply to pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN), however. As a result, children with statements of SEN and profound multiple learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties with complex medical needs or a severe learning difficulty have been identified through the statementing process as priority groups for admission to special schools for the 2020-21 academic year. Children with statements of SEN have also been prioritised through the statementing process for pre-school admission, P1 and the post-primary transition from P7 to year 8.

Officials are continuing to work towards implementation of the new special educational needs framework, which

will introduce new regulations governing the statutory assessment process. I had intended to consult on both the draft regulations and the draft code of practice this spring. The consultation's launch date is under review. Work is continuing on the health and emotional well-being framework for education. The target date for its completion is December 2020, but that will be kept under review.

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

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

I appreciate that this crisis is impacting on the mental health and emotional well-being of our children and young people, and I will be considering how best we can support them when they return to school. I am mindful that many will face higher levels of anxiety and distress and will need help with making the transition back to school and with the impact of the prolonged absence. Youth Service also provides support to vulnerable young people. Provision includes online support and communication via a new Youth Online website; one-to-one support where it is appropriate and provided in a safe way; and support for young people experiencing mental health difficulties. The Start programme is continuing to support young people under paramilitary threat. Providing continuity of learning for our young people is a key focus for the education sector. With little notice, schools were able to make a rapid transition to distance learning. That not only reflects the skills and motivation of our teaching workforce but highlights the strengths of our system. Unlike other education systems, we have in place an education technology system that is effectively supporting online learning. Through C2k, the Education Authority delivers a comprehensive range of tools to support teaching and learning. That includes providing devices for teachers and pupils, secure learning platforms, centralised learning resources and professional development resources for teachers.

Advice from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) points to the need for distance learning provision that is broad and balanced and emphasises the need for a balance between online learning, written and practical activities, outdoor learning and free time. Reflecting that advice, feedback from school leaders has pointed to a wide range of strategies and resources being adopted by schools. The findings of a recent survey confirmed a blended approach, with all schools engaged in distance learning using either online or alternative approaches and many using both. In special schools, packs that contain

sensory or physical equipment have been supplied to pupils who need them. I also pay tribute to the parents and carers who are supporting their children's learning during this period. I noted in the findings of a recent survey by Parentkind that the support that parents find most helpful for their children is communication from the school and feedback from the teacher.

As well as the C2k facilities, many schools are using digital tools such as their own school text services, websites, social media channels and individual school apps to communicate with parents and pupils. That will continue to be very important in the coming months, as we move towards a more blended approach to learning, with time spent in the classroom and at home. Another strength of our system is the availability of support from our managing authorities and support bodies. Designated link officers are assigned to each educational setting. Those officers help school leaders remain connected to the wider educational community. They deal with issues as they arise and signpost schools to resources and guidance. Through a programme of work focused on the continuity of learning, the whole education sector has ensured that appropriate action is taken to support the learning, progression and well-being of our children and young people.

Consulting widely with principals, our education partners have worked extremely hard to develop a wide range of resources to support distance learning. They have included online resources on C2k's education network service; guidance and advice to parents and carers on education websites; support materials for parents of children attending preschool, primary and special schools; and third party-funded organisations providing curriculum support and learning opportunities for young people. A recent survey of parents highlighted that almost 50% had used BBC resources to support home learning. I am also pleased to report that my Department and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) are working with the BBC on further resources that, alongside CCEA's home-learning resources, may be helpful for schools, parents and carers.

The situation is not without its challenges. We do not know the final impact of the current crisis on children's safety, well-being and learning, but, as I have outlined, we began from a strong starting point. It is important that we acknowledge the steps that have been taken across the education system, in all settings, to mitigate the risks of any loss of learning. Working in that context, we are now looking strategically at how to support the system in the medium and longer term, building on what exists and planning for a return to school over an extended period and with a blended learning approach.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, as you will be aware, on 16 April, I announced my decision to suspend examinations for A levels, AS levels, and GCSEs. I made that decision after giving careful consideration to the full range of options and advice, as well as feedback from key education stakeholders. On 7 May, CCEA launched a consultation on the development of an alternative appeals mechanism for the summer 2020 awarding of GCSEs, AS levels and A levels. The consultation can be accessed through CCEA's website, and today is the closing date for responses. My officials have been working with CCEA and colleagues across the UK to develop appropriate arrangements that are robust as well as fair. I am sure that

I am not alone in wishing that we were not in this situation and that exams could continue as normal; however that is not possible. Whilst these arrangements are not and can never be perfect, I believe that they are the best solution available to us. I thank CCEA, ETI and others who engaged with the Department at short notice for the hard work that has gone into developing the arrangements.

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

I am conscious that some school pupils are more at risk of falling behind in their learning. In response, a scheme has been introduced to lend devices to educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners moving into key transition years. Many schools have already lent out equipment such as iPads and laptops to pupils for use at home. Teachers have made direct contact with pupils who have not logged onto the C2k network to ensure that they have access to IT equipment. In addition, the Education Authority is engaging with schools in a process to lend digital devices to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those who may be considered vulnerable and those in examination year groups.

Subject to the necessary approvals, I intend to initiate a three-stage process for the allocation of digital devices to children. Stage one will use existing school stock; stage two will involve 3,000 new laptops that have been procured by the Education Authority; and stage three, if needed, will involve 4,000 to 8,000 additional devices. That could provide up to 24,000 devices to be lent out to students over the next few months. I have agreed a range of criteria prioritising children in year groups 11, 13, 6 and 3 who are eligible for free school meals, have special educational needs, are in the newcomer target groups, are looked-after children or are considered vulnerable. Children who are eligible for free school meals in those year groups but do not meet the other criteria will be considered next for distribution. Finally and subject to availability, pupils who are eligible for free school meals in other year groups will be considered on a similar basis.

Members will be aware that schools are open to provide supervised learning for children who are vulnerable or whose parents are key workers. Recently, there has been an average daily attendance of around 1,500 vulnerable children and children of key workers at around 450 schools, supported by approximately 2,000 teaching and non-teaching staff. The ongoing development of cluster schools to ensure provision for children has been progressing well, and there are currently 131 schools involved in 33 clusters across a wide geographical area. The EA key worker request system had a total of 616 children needing to be placed, and that has been reduced to 42 as of 18 May. Detailed guidance for schools is available on the Department's website. It includes

guidance on how to manage social distancing in schools, along with a video produced by the Public Health Agency on hygiene and social distancing in education settings. I reiterate my thanks to the education leaders who are playing their part in supporting vulnerable children and children of key workers by opening their schools and working collaboratively with other schools in these unprecedented times.

Members will be aware that, on 27 March, I announced a volunteering scheme to assist in the response to COVID-19. To date, there are in excess of 1,000 volunteers, and the volunteering scheme has been paused. It has not been necessary to call on our volunteers, as our dedicated teaching and non-teaching staff have been coping well. The Department is planning ahead for the holiday period to ensure the availability of provision and could avail itself of volunteers during the summer months, should the current situation remain.

I come now to childcare and the £12 million emergency package for childcare provision for key workers. My ministerial colleague Robin Swann gave an update on that at last week's Ad Hoc Committee, so I will not repeat any of that, except to say that applications for the scheme are now being processed by the Business Services Organisation, and a reference group comprising education, health, childcare and parent representatives has been established to monitor progress. My Department continues to fund non-statutory settings that are in receipt of preschool education funding and Bright Start school-age childcare funding in 2020-21. I have increased the 2020-21 Sure Start allocation to £27 million — an increase of £1.45 million — to allow services to be maintained at existing levels.

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

We are beginning to look to the future. There is a need to help to secure the best possible educational future for all our children in what are extremely difficult circumstances. While tremendous work has been done in remote learning over the past two months, it is important that we begin to see recovery and a process of phased reopening of schools. That, however, must be led by medical and scientific evidence to ensure that it is done in a manner, and a timescale that are safe for our pupils, our staff and wider society.

The pathway to recovery will follow the route outlined in the education section of the 'Executive Approach to Decision-Making' document. While all steps will ultimately be driven by circumstances and the medical advice, I am aware of the need to give as much certainty to people as possible, so let me set out the likely time frame for schools. At present, schools are closed to all but the children of key workers and vulnerable children for supervised learning. That number has been slowly expanding since Easter, and I am keen to see more vulnerable children attending school. Similarly, should the Executive widen the definition of key workers, that too can be accommodated. However, neither action would radically alter the pattern

of children currently at school. The phased reopening of schools will require engagement, preparation and the implementation of actions in conjunction with a wide range of stakeholders. We have one chance to get this right, and it cannot be done overnight. Therefore, other than for the provision for the children of key workers and vulnerable children that I have already mentioned, there will be no overall reopening of schools during the remainder of this academic year. The Department is establishing a restart programme that, working alongside a wide range of stakeholders, will put in place the detailed arrangements that will enable a safe phased reopening of schools. The work on that will be conducted during the remainder of this term and the summer. We must all use the time wisely and constructively.

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

Subject to medical guidance and safety, it would be my aim to see a phased reopening of schools, beginning with a limited provision for key cohort years in August, followed by phased provision for all pupils at the beginning of September. It will not be a return to school as it was prior to COVID-19 but, rather, a "new normal", reflective of social distancing and a medically safe regime. For all pupils, it will involve a schedule with a mixture of school attendance and remote learning at home. In line with the Executive's strategy and contingent on medical guidance and scientific evidence on susceptibility and transmission, consideration may be given to a full return of cohorts of younger pupils.

This is the biggest public health crisis in living memory. The Executive's priority is to keep people safe and to support those who have faced real hardship. My Department and the wider education sector will continue to play a full part in the ongoing effort while focusing on the future for when we return to some kind of normality.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for his statement. Eighteen Members wish to ask a question. Question time will last roughly an hour. Eighteen times two, including supplementary questions, is 36. That gives Members some idea of the time constraints that we operate under, so could we, please, keep it focused?

Mr Lyttle (Committee Chair - Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. I assure him that the Education Committee will continue to work with him to ensure guidance and support for our schools and pupils to maintain equal educational opportunity at this time.

The Minister's failure to address post-primary transfer in the statement will cause as much anger as his ill-considered welcome of the inadequate two-week delay to post-primary transfer tests scheduled for November and December of this year. Despite the dedicated and creative work of teachers and parents, it goes without saying that children will be experiencing distance and blended learning in different and unequal ways. How can the Minister justify his support for the requirement of children

to sit transfer tests in November and December of this year? What contingency plans are in place should it not be possible to sit those tests?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his support [*Laughter.*] On remote learning, we are trying to ensure through link workers and the ETI — this was raised by one of the trade union officials at Committee this week — that the focus is on the pedagogy and resources available. That is where the ETI's focus will be in trying to ensure that there is as much consistency as possible. In trying to create as much of a level playing field in remote learning as possible, the aim is to close the gaps, particularly in digital resources, as much as possible. Can we ensure that there will be a precisely level playing field for everybody or that everybody will be in exactly the same place? No, I do not think that anybody can do that; that is the nature of things.

It is clear that as much certainty as possible needs to be provided on the choices. This is not an ideal situation in post-primary transfer. The member, myself and others will disagree over the merits of academic selection, but it is something that schools can use as a means of dealing with oversubscription. Also, if academic selection is available, it is difficult to see a route, other than a test, by which there is sufficiently robust data that can be used. Thirdly, I appreciate the very genuine concerns that are out there about timing. However, if things were simply pushed back to a much a much later date, it appears likely — from examining the dates and given the need to work alongside the complexities of the processes in moving from the point at which results are issued to final placements — that that would mean that placements would not be able to be made until the middle of July. I also suspect that we will inevitably have a higher level of appeals, which would lead to appeals possibly going into the middle of October. If we are talking about providing certainty and as fair and as balanced a position for children as possible, a timeline in which some children would not know their post-primary school until some point in year 8 is not acceptable, and that is the driver. With officials, we will look to see if there is anything that can be done to tighten that timetable and make it better by having exams in January, for example. However, it is very difficult to take a great deal of time out of the process. There is a range of, I think, 14 or 15 measures that need to be taken between the results being issued and the final placement. It is very difficult to take sufficient time out and make that workable with a post-Christmas exam schedule. It is probably the least worst option at present, notwithstanding the wider argument that people have over whether we use academic selection or not.

Mr Lyttle: This is not about the disagreement of the Minister and I on academic selection. This is about thousands of 10- and 11-year-old children across Northern Ireland and their best interests. I have been inundated by people who disagree profoundly with transfer tests being set during a global health pandemic. Will the Education Minister use his legislative powers to pause the use of these tests for post-primary transfer in 2020-21, if no alternative can be found as he suggests?

Mr Weir: With respect, I said that there is an alternative. If the member is asking whether I will use my power to ban academic selection, no, I will not. The reality will be —

Mr Lyttle: I did not say that; sorry.

Mr Weir: Well, with respect, the member is in danger of saying one thing and meaning another thing. Frankly, if you are saying, "Take powers to stop academic selection for this year", you are talking about banning academic selection. If the Member wants to abolish all grammar schools, let him, at least, have the courage to say that. Alternatively, if he does not, can he provide another means of selection? There will be schools that are oversubscribed for which selection can then take place. Everybody is aware of the concerns about that particular set of modalities. It is all very well to say, "Stop it this year. Do not do this", but not to provide an alternative to what exists — I appreciate that there are different views about academic selection — would plunge pupils into the void of not knowing what will replace it. If we say that certainty is the key message that is needed for pupils and parents, simply announcing the abolition of something without putting anything in its place would be highly responsible *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Lyttle, you got to ask your question. The Minister should have been allowed to answer it without being interrupted by you from a sedentary position. That is not appropriate.

Mr Wells: *[Inaudible.]*

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Says Mr Wells from a sedentary position *[Laughter.]*

Mr Humphrey: Before I ask my question, I beg your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: it is good to see the honourable Member for East Antrim in this place today.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Humphrey: On behalf of these Benches, I assure him, our valued and trusted colleague, of our continued support despite the appalling and cowardly threat to his life that he received earlier this week.

Thank you for your statement to the House, Minister. On behalf of the DUP, I thank all those principals, teachers, non-teaching staff and EA staff for all the work that they are doing in these most difficult times. I congratulate you on having secured the extra resource to assist substitute teachers.

In North Belfast, I represent some of the most deprived constituents in the United Kingdom. Yesterday, in Committee, I raised the issue of the disparity in learning and access to resources, particularly IT and computers. I very much welcome what your statement said about laptops and about reaching disadvantaged and vulnerable communities across my constituency and, indeed, Northern Ireland. When will that scheme begin to be rolled out?

Mr Weir: The scheme is already in the process of being rolled out. Many schools that had laptops or computers have, proactively, already lent them out. Perhaps, there was a little misconception initially that, for instance, school laptops would not necessarily be compatible with a home environment. However, with C2k, it was fairly clear that it could be done with small adaptations. Those devices have already been lent out. There were already 3,000 devices in the pipeline that were being procured by the EA. What will then be sought will be a movement, a shift towards a small amount of capital. It will not require an enormous amount of money in the grand scheme of things. There would be re-profiling of a certain small element of capital to ensure that those additional devices are provided. That is the aim.

In most cases, what we have found by surveying the evidence is that the principal problem is not specifically that a household has no device; it is that there are a number of people in the household trying to use the device. It is, therefore, about trying to provide that additional support. While there will be big challenges for the workforce when we move to a situation in which there is blend of learning in school and remotely, hopefully, particularly for parents and children, that will enable better and more seamless continuity of learning. We are also looking at continuity of support and what else can be done in the system to provide that level where there has clearly been a gap.

Perhaps, at the outset of my answer, I should have associated myself with the Member's remarks about the honourable Member for East Antrim. I am glad to see him in his place.

Ms Mullan: Minister, thank you for your statement and for the work that you and your Department are doing over this period. I also express my thanks to our teaching and non-teaching staff, parents and guardians.

On free school meal payments, I agree that no single Department has responsibility for leading on food poverty. We must look collectively at how we can continue those payments over the summer, so I was glad to see it in the statement. Minister, no doubt you are aware of the intense concern and anxiety that exists around the reopening of our schools. In order to address those concerns and give confidence to people, do you agree that parents and young people should be involved in the restart programme, along with other stakeholders, and that it is vital that they are involved from the beginning?

Mr Weir: The aim is that there will be an overall restart programme and, within that, there will be six work streams to deal with the nitty-gritty. I am due to consider, very shortly, the methodology of that engagement. There is likely to be engagement by way of a reference group or something at a high level, and, because some of it will involve expertise, there will be engagement at a more nitty-gritty level. Sometimes, that will involve educational stakeholders. There will be a clear role to ensure that the medical and scientific advice is there, because some of the issues will be medically-driven and some will be education-driven. Some issues will be very cross-cutting, so, for example, I am very keen to have high levels of engagement with the Minister for Infrastructure because there will be issues around what happens with Translink and how we can have consistency of approach between school transport and what is available in school.

There is also a key role for parents and students. As well as the direct and formal engagement and work, I am keen to receive views from, and have as much interaction as possible with, all the relevant stakeholders. For example, last week, I had an online meeting with a group of principals, and I am doing a similar exercise tomorrow. Next week, there will be a question-and-answer session with some pupils from schools. I also welcome contact, either to me or the Department, from individual educational stakeholders.

Although a lot of us sometimes pretend that it is the case, there is not a monopoly of wisdom in this place or, indeed, anywhere else. Therefore, ideas and solutions will be thrown up from a range of different sources. It is

important that we have as much consensus as possible, moving forward. There will always be people at one end of the scale or the other: some want schools to be entirely and 100% open tomorrow; others do not want anything to happen until there is a vaccine and COVID-19 is out of the way. The bulk of people want a sensible route that protects our education and health. I look forward to cooperating, working and engaging. Given the timescales, there is the opportunity for engagement, preparation and implementation.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. We touched on the anxiety that young people are facing at the minute. In your statement, you talked about the time frame for the health and well-being framework. That was set, before COVID-19 happened, for December 2020. How realistic is it that we will meet that time frame? Now, more than ever, it is important that it is in place.

Mr Weir: The member is right about the importance of this, and I want to move ahead with it as quickly as we can. The problem has been that there has been disruption in consultation and implementation. To some extent, to sketch ahead, precisely, with full consultation and full implementation is difficult to do. There will be no artificial barriers to that being put in place. As we move ahead, whatever support can be provided, within available budgets, for the health and well-being of our young people, must be provided. Although framework is very useful to provide a strategic direction, we should not wait on a framework before we do some things that need to be done.

Mr Stalford: Before I call the next member, can I also associate myself with Mr Humphrey's comments? It is outrageous that a man of Mr Hilditch's standing, who has served the people of East Antrim for more than 20 years, has been threatened by faceless thugs. We all stand with you, David.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I echo your support to the member across the Chamber. There is absolutely no place for such threats. Other members have faced such threats in recent weeks. We must stand united against those who are determined to pull down democracy.

Minister, I thank you for your statement. I also want to put on public record my gratitude for the work that you have done for substitute teachers. You will know that, for the last number of weeks, we have swamped your social media and email inbox with messages from substitute teachers who have very kindly shared their stories and their plight with us. I am glad that that issue is now resolved.

Following on from the points that were made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I am not interested in the debate over whether we should or should not have a transfer test. What I am interested in is that we do what is right for children at this time, given that we are in a global health crisis. Many parents out there are very worried about the impact that not being able to attend school will have on those children. Some children have been able to avail themselves of tuition and the sorts, while others, unfortunately, have not been able to. Some children can access broadband, and there are some who cannot. Clearly, some children have been disadvantaged, and I do not think that it is fair that the test will go ahead

during this time. It raises many questions and will bring about many problems and challenges beyond the test.

Mr Weir: I thank the member, although I am not sure whether there was actually a question in that. First of all, on substitute teachers, one of the things that I was acutely aware of was that, at one end of the scale, some substitute teachers work very occasionally, while, other substitute teachers, particularly those in their mid-to-late twenties or early thirties, with young families and mortgages, are highly dependent on what is effectively a full-time job. So, I was glad to see that happening.

With the transfer test, it is ultimately about trying to ensure that we get the best possible solutions for our young people. The problem is trying to find practical and agreed solutions that are workable. In an ideal world, for example, the tests could be done and an instant result produced, meaning that we could operate in a different time frame. The fact is that, even when the tests are done, it is a number of weeks before results are available, as is the case with any high-level written test. There are always challenges and difficulties, so it is about trying to ensure that we get the best, practically driven solution.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you for answering that, Minister. I did have a question about the GL test, but my handwriting is so poor that I did not pick it up. *[Laughter.]* Has any consideration been given to using the GL test as an alternative to the transfer test? Maybe that would give some ease. It would certainly take away some of the time pressure and would take away some of the stress. It is largely accepted that it could be a good alternative, and I think that it would certainly help those children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mr Weir: I thank the member for his helpful suggestions. I will resist, therefore, the temptation to put him in detention with 1,000 lines: "I must write my question out more clearly".

Any suggestions will be looked at. Those are private tests and, from a methodology point of view, there is a wide gap between GL, through PPTC, and AQE. Clearly, there could be discussions between the two. We should remember that the concern has been about the timing, leaving aside some of the broader issues. The AQE tests are usually in November and early December, while the GL test is scheduled for December as well. Therefore, that would not necessarily provide a solution. Schools have made a very clear-cut choice about which of the tests they want. I have expressed a clear-cut opinion that, at some stage, if agreement cannot be reached — there is unlikely to be a single-state position taken — the two organisations should at least move together.

There is a further thing that could be done to at least provide some reassurance. PPTC and AQE must acknowledge that, given the disruption to the curriculum, the tests must be, this year, pitched to a different level than previous years. There needs to be cognisance of the fact that pupils have not been in the position to have the same learning experience. That is notwithstanding all the good things that have happened through remote learning, but it is, by definition, mitigation of what would normally happen. I think that that must be reflected in any examinations that are put forward by those organisations.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister. I go on record to emphasise the absolute disgust that I, my party and, I am

sure, the whole House feel about the threats that have been handed out to Mr Hilditch and other members. They are not acceptable in 2020, and they never were.

Minister, thank you for your announcement today. I would like to take the credit for that because I was on 'The Nolan Show' this morning asking for tablets, but I cannot possibly do that. So, thank you for that. I am not going to move off the topic that most of the Committee has been on, and that is AQE testing. It is the most important topic that we could be discussing today, and, up to this point, you have been an excellent Minister.

I was reading through notes, and you even mentioned it today, that on 7 May CCEA launched a consultation on the development of an alternative appeals process, which will be a considerable piece of work. On a number of times when we have chatted about this issue, the appeals process for AQE and GL testing has been one of the major problems in the backlog and the time constraints. Has that been considered? Why has it not been put forward so far?

Mr Weir: I look forward to reading the front page of the 'Ulster Star' where I am sure that the member will be suitably modest in his role in claiming anything. The issue as regards CCEA and its consultation in appeals is of a very different nature from transfer issues, the reason being that, on GCSEs and A levels, what is able to be done is based on a much higher level of robust data. For example, if there is any methodology that does not involve a transfer test, obviously, with COVID, P6 assessments are not there, so you would be going back to P5 data, which, in and of itself, has effectively been done largely for internal use by schools. Consequently, it is not always done on the same basis and cannot have any level of comparability.

The data for GCSEs, ASs and A levels is a lot closer to that. There is also the nature of the appeals because, while there is an ongoing consultation as regards the CCEA appeals mechanism — so there is a limited amount that I can say in relation to that — the appeals will largely be focused on whether the process was done correctly. It is almost a quasi-judicial review-type situation.

For post-primary transfer — and this is irrespective of whether it is selective or non-selective — it is about whether the parent gets the child into the school that they want or the school that was most appropriate. It is about the exceptional circumstances of their case. So, that is a very different beast.

That, in and of itself, will take a long time to process and always does. You could not simply say, "Have the forms been processed right?", or "Has there been a mistake in the process?", which is, essentially, the basis of the A level and GCSE side of it will be.

Similarly, as part of this, there is the opportunity with GCSEs and A levels, as they reach a completion point in 2021, to take the equivalent of a resit and take a second test to enable those marks to feed in. Clearly, that is not the same as if you are talking about the end of year 8 moving into year 9.

Mr Butler: Minister, thank you for that. You did lean in towards the end of the answer on something about which I would like a bit more information. This is a one-time-only test for these young people, and, unlike GCSEs and A levels, they will not get a chance to resit. On the Chair's earlier point with regard to the Coronavirus Act 2020, in

the developing weeks and days ahead when the picture fully builds on the pressures that these young people are facing, will you look at the Coronavirus Act 2020? Given that this is a private test, will you perhaps intervene to ensure that our children are protected and are kept at the centre of this debate?

Mr Weir: I always want to engage, but I do not want to give people any level of uncertainty, false fears or expectations. I have had emails from people on different sides of this taking views. Some people are very concerned even about any conversation about postponement. There is a range of views out there.

I will not bring forward legislation to abolish academic selection. In effect, if we say that the tests will be put off or removed in some way, they can be moved back only if there is a timescale that enables people to transfer properly. It appears that that is not the case. Similarly, if they are put off completely, that will leave a void. That is where there is a reluctance, and I do not want to give people a false expectation of what is potentially likely to happen.

Mr Storey: As a member of the policing board, I concur with the comments that have been made in relation to my friend and colleague, and we wish him well.

Minister, during your statement you referred to the need to have a discussion, and it was mentioned by other members, about when the schools will reopen. One of the concerns that we are picking up across our constituencies is the need for detailed information. Given that schools are closed in real terms and the term will come to an end in a few weeks' time, in June, the time for that engagement is running out. Will you consider trying to have more of that conversation, so that parents do know what will happen in September when schools, in a graduated way, will return?

Mr Weir: First, as much certainty as possible has been put out early. Ultimately we are talking about the details. There are different ways that you could phase it in for schools, for instance there are different ways that the school week could be done. That may well mean that what is done in a primary school is not always appropriate in a post-primary school, because there are particular subject matters.

Part of the idea is to have the maximum level of engagement. There is not a blueprint that could simply be pulled down off the shelf, but, if there was, and it said exactly how this is going to work out, that would, in many ways, negate the whole purpose of that detailed engagement. We want to give as much certainty as possible. There is a space of time, and I suspect that there is at least a little bit of opportunity. One constraint that maybe is not there to the same extent is that some of the detail will have to be worked out not just over the next handful of weeks, but over the summer. The advantage of that is that it is unlikely that there will be too many people leaving on holidays over that period.

There is a wide range of issues that will need to be tackled, such as how social distancing will be managed, what the timetable will be, what hygiene arrangements will be there, even down to nitty-gritty details, so that if a school reopens for different year groups, how they will arrange for children to be left off or picked up. I want to have those in-depth conversations and there will be a lot of work that will be done.

Today, I want to give certainty that there will not be any overall opening of schools this term. We are looking to do key cohorts in the third week of August, and schools are opening in a phased approach from the beginning of September. There is a range of ways in which that can be done, and the details will need to be scoped out.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his reply. Obviously, all of that will come at a cost because it will probably require additional facilities, additional teachers for it to be managed, or other additional staff. What concerns do you have about ensuring that there will be the required additional money, given that your budget has been considerably constrained and that you have found an additional £8 million to deal with the issue of substitute teachers? Clearly there will be a need for your Department to consider the financial implications of implementing that plan.

Mr Weir: One of the work streams that we will be looking at will be the financial asks in relation to this. However, it is important to realise, and I want to be fair to all Departments, that there is a lot of pressure on budgets. A lot of money has been allocated, but there is not some large pool of money that is going to be available. I hope that in the Budget allocation for 2020-21 there will be some extra money overall for schools, which will help with the budget for schools. Will there be money for additional staff or a wide range of other things? I think that is unlikely and I do not want to give people a misleading impression. This will have to be done from existing budgets and existing staff, and it will be about how that can be best operated in an inventive form to help delivery. That is not going to be easy.

For example, in some schools there will be some teaching staff who have to shield and if they are ill there is provision for a substitute. However, part of this will be that, if somebody is able to work from home, the balance of responsibilities may shift a bit so that those who have to work from home will have a much greater role in delivering remote learning, and those in the classroom will have a much higher percentage of delivery in the classroom. It is about shifting some of those responsibilities.

Some of this will have inescapable costs, I have no doubt, but I do not want to give people false impressions that there will be some large sum of money available. Frankly, I would love it and would not stand in the way if the Finance Minister or the Executive want to give large amounts of money to me. There is a former Education Minister here, who will know that if Education gets more money it can always spend it and spend it very wisely.

Mr O'Dowd: *[Inaudible.] [Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: Yes, well, let us not get into revisionism.

The likelihood of large, additional sums of money being put into Education is highly unlikely, so it is about people thinking through how we can cope with the current situation — it will not be perfect — from, largely speaking, existing budgets. There will be issues with free school meals and additional issues with cleaning, for instance, that will lead to inevitable additional costs, but, beyond that, there will not be a pot of gold for anybody out there to spend.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members, we are now halfway through the hour and six members have asked their questions and supplementary questions. At the current rate, that means that 12 members will be

able to ask questions. It also means that Ms Sheerin, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Hilditch, Mr McGuigan, Mr Wells, Miss Woods and Mr Carroll will not get to ask their questions. Can we please pick up the pace? Short, sharp questions and short, sharp answers.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, thank you for your statement and, specifically, for the update on the childcare situation. We know how crucial that sector is to our society and there is a big job of work ahead to ensure sustainability. Has any consideration been given to how the childcare sector can play a role when schools close for the summer?

Mr Weir: I take on board what the Principal Deputy Speaker said. I am not quite sure whether his reading out of that list of names was meant as an incentive for me to be more succinct or long-winded.

There is a package there that may not all be spent within that period, so there may be something going forward. The importance of childcare is widely recognised by the Executive. Again, I do not think that I am breaching any particular confidences when I say that Executive members accept that there will be a need for a specific conversation about childcare, beyond that which is being provided by schools. The member is right: the provision of childcare will be a critical to enable people to get back to work. Therefore, there will need to be a specific additional focus on it, beyond what is happening in schools.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you for your response, Minister. I am glad to hear that the Executive as a whole are taking it very seriously.

Will you outline whether your Department, alongside other Departments, has started the process of planning? Have there been conversations on that and have plans been put into place, especially now that we know that the reference group has been set up? Can that reference group be used to ensure that there is proper sustainability for the childcare sector on the other side of COVID-19?

Mr Weir: The childcare reference group will have a critical role to play in that. The mechanics are largely being handled by the Business Services Organisation and the DOH. Good work is being done. Mention was made last week of the disjoint between, for instance, trying to align the DOH definition of key workers with —.

There is a wider bit beyond the present funding package. It is not just about the wider contribution that childcare makes to society but the childcare settings themselves. Ultimately, many businesses will be able to reopen based on social-distancing restrictions. That will create inconvenience for them, but it will be no more than that. There will be a greater level of difficulty for childcare facilities if they are trying to operate with only a fraction of the normal number of children. That must also be taken into account.

Miss McIlveen: I very much welcome the statement by the Minister, particularly the support that is being given to substitute teachers. Of course, I am not sure whether I should be thanking him or others, because, as we know, success has many fathers. Regardless of the amount of available teaching resources, and I appreciate the very hard work of teachers in providing those, parents and carers are key to the success of homeschooling and, for many, it has proved extremely challenging. The amount of direct engagement between parents and their

children's teachers, particularly at primary level, has varied considerably and most of it is voluntary on the part of the parents. Was a standardised approach ever considered?

Mr Weir: The aim would be — that is where the link officers are working, in particular, with ETI — to move as closely as possible to a standardised approach. How much that can be entirely policed, shall we say, is difficult. However, if there is availability of online resources and much more aligned work between the system and schools, as a whole, that will be helpful.

Funnily enough, I think that, while that will create a blend of homeschooling and classroom schooling, it may create an awful lot of great challenges for teachers. I think the much greater involvement in the classroom and therefore being able to give stuff directly will be of assistance to parents and pupils.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Miss McIlveen.

Miss McIlveen: I am happy to give way to another member.

Mr O'Dowd: I was not going to ask the Minister about academic selection, but I feel forced to speak up on behalf of parents who are not putting their children forward for academic rejection — parents who care about their children's education and parents who love their children as much as any other parent does.

Will the Minister assure the House that he will use his energies and resources in the Department of Education to represent all children, not just those currently involved in a debate about the needs of institutions rather than the needs of children? I am concerned that the Minister is distracted in the wrong direction at this time.

Mr Weir: It would not be a Question Time without the former Minister asking something about academic selection. It is very popular to use the phrase, "the new normal", but it is kind of reassuring to get an occasional shaft of light from the "old normal".

We are dedicated to trying to do everything that we can for all children; in particular, we are, as I mentioned, looking at measures that we can put in place for vulnerable children. A wide range of families, irrespective of their views on selection, irrespective of whether they are involved with selection or whether their child is in for a test or not, equally merit attention and support. Part of the continuity of learning project that we will look at will be about what level of support can be given to all children. I am happy to try to treat all children equally and give them the fullest support that I can.

Mr O'Dowd: I just emphasise to the Minister that I do not want him "to try": I want him to treat all children equally in the system.

Does the Minister agree that there is an alternative? Schools that practise academic selection can bring children in under the same system as every other post-primary school — indeed, the majority of schools — does. Ending academic selection will not end grammar schools. Grammar schools are a management type; it has nothing to do with academic selection.

Mr Weir: With respect, I think that the key driver for a grammar school is a level of academic selection. I think that Churchill said, after the First World War, that:

"we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again",

i.e. the arguments in this part of the world resurfaced after all that had happened. It seems that the COVID virus will come and go and the arguments about academic selection will probably remain.

Mr McNulty: I begin by expressing my condolences to the family, friends and former teammates of John Murphy RIP. John was a great Down player. He won the all-Ireland in 1968, scoring a crucial goal in the final against Kerry. A few years earlier, he won the MacRory Cup with the Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School, and my dad played full back in that team. He was an important selector for the Down all-Ireland winning teams in 1991 and 1994, and he selected a very successful Mayobridge club team. I had huge admiration for the man. His picture was on the wall in my school, and, even though he was a Down man, I had huge admiration for him. He was a great Gael. I am sorry for the loss to his family.

Minister, you mentioned the restart programme, but, unfortunately, there is still no plan. I understand the complexities in relation to shielding members of staff and the social-distancing necessities. Have you considered workforce availability and the possibility of using community centres or halls to provide increased space so that the continuity of learning is enhanced by having more kids taught when they return to school?

Mr Weir: Given the member's current haircut, I will not argue with him.

In moving ahead, we should look at solutions and for innovative solutions where we can. We have to make sure that whatever facilities are available are compatible with child protection issues and that side of things. There will be a particular role for the community in providing a critical bridge over the summer. Issues around some of the provisions and, particularly, summer schemes will be about the role that the community, voluntary and private sectors can play and about permission.

As for the detail, the point is that we are at the beginning of a journey of recovery. To that extent, a critical element of the engagement will be to scope out and get the detail on the issues and to get down to the nitty-gritty. In certain regards, even if I was sitting here — it would be a wiser man than me who would have this — with a blueprint of precisely everything that would happen come September, it would be foolhardy to do that anyway without such engagement. On various levels, there is wider support that can be and is being provided by the community. As with a lot of things, the COVID situation can bring out the best as well. That support would be useful.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to our head teachers, principals, teaching staff and support staff, who have been completely disrupted and have had their roles reconstituted but have managed to do their very best to help the kids whom they are responsible for? They have made extraordinary efforts to date and are determined to continue to make extraordinary efforts to educate our young people.

Mr Weir: I am happy to associate myself with the member's remarks and to add thanks to everybody in the education sector. While there is a lot that can worry us about the current situation and there are a lot of negatives,

which will exist for years to come, a lot of good work has come out of this, such as the extent to which everybody in sectors has pulled together *[Interruption.]* Is anyone pretending not to be guilty when they hear their phone going off?

The hard work and the extent to which a lot of people in the educational sector go the extra mile is to be commended. Innovation has arisen out of this situation. That suggests that, even if we were in a position this Monday to go back to what previously passed for normal, there are lessons to be learned and things to be put in place. I am happy to echo the member's remarks.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister referred to new norms in his speech. Does he agree that the current policy of providing free meals to qualifying pupils only during term time has no basis in logic, in that, if a child is going to go hungry in May and June, they are at equal risk in July and August? The Executive need to join the Department in addressing that.

Mr Weir: Free school meal entitlement has always been to ensure that children attending school, while they are under the care of the school, get lunch. I understand the logic of what the member says: I simply make the point that that has not been done up to now and would require considerable additional resource for it to be the case. It strikes me that one of the things that may well need to be looked at, as the Department for Communities looks at providing food for all those who are vulnerable in our society, is that that may be the best route to provide it. There is no point in me pretending that there is money from the Department of Education to do that over the summer: there simply is not. We would be talking about something in the region of up to an additional £20 million, and there is no budget for that. What happens over the summer overall will be a question for the Executive as a whole. I do not want to mislead people about having a pot of money that, as Minister of Education, I can simply draw down.

Mr Nesbitt: I am absolutely not saying that it is the responsibility of the Minister's Department only. It is a cross-cutting measure, Minister, and, if you are bringing it up to the Executive — as I hope you will — you could point out that, in the 14 outcomes in the draft Programme for Government framework, tackling holiday hunger will tackle at least four of those:

"We have a more equal society ... We enjoy long, healthy, active lives ... We care for others and we help those in need".

The clincher, for me, to be taken to the Executive is:

"We give our children and young people the best start in life".

Tackling holiday hunger has to be a ticked box for that.

Mr Weir: I do not disagree with anything that the member has said. As for a tick box and to be fair to the Executive as a whole, it is not a question of choosing between good spend and bad spend. We are in a situation where there has already been, I think, over £1 billion allocated through COVID given the pressures that are there, and, if the Executive had the money, they could double that in meeting good schemes. There has got to be a point, though, at which choices are made. I put that as a caveat. What the member has said is very virtuous and something that is actually very good — I completely agree with

him in that regard — but so will be other things that, at the moment, cannot be afforded. Therefore, it will be a question for the overall Executive to decide.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for his statement. I draw his attention to the educational restart. The Minister will be aware that there is a lot of anxiety at present, particularly on the mainland, about the safety of pupils returning to school. By way of reassurance, I ask the Minister what consideration he will give to adapting or, indeed, adopting what works in other countries that are further along the process?

Mr Weir: Obviously, we must have solutions that are bespoke to Northern Ireland. It seems likely that this will kick in at some stage in June in England, and we will be able to learn from that. One of the advantages that we have is the shared experience that we have with other jurisdictions. Most people will not see me as a great Eurocrat, but we have seen what has happened in various European countries: Germany, Denmark and other places. We can learn, generally speaking, and see what works, what does not work and traps to avoid on that basis. There are those conversations.

For instance, I know that there are innovative approaches being taken in Germany to getting groups back to school. There seem to be constants, one of which is that we have to be careful that people do not regard this as simply safe. For example, the evidence will create a bit of a differential between very young children and older children.

Therefore, it may be that, as we move ahead, the solutions for a six-year-old will not be the same as the solutions for a 16-year-old, and that will be on a range of issues. It is important that we look outwards at what has worked and try to take that level of advice.

Ms Bunting: In the Minister's statement, he has outlined that there has been a huge amount done, rightly, for those who were in pre-measured hardship prior to the crisis, and that is fair. However, I draw his attention to the working poor, who are increasing in number, and to those who are just about getting by and are falling between stools for help. I ask the Minister to take that into account with his policies, going forward.

On the back of that, I know it is not fully the Minister's remit, but, since he provides some of the money, I draw an issue to his attention that I request him to take back to his Executive colleagues. I ask for clarity on childcare and childminding provision. As society opens up and people are called back to work, they are not able to avail themselves of grandparents to look after their children. Therefore, the opening of schools or the provision of childcare and childminding for the children of workers who are being called back to work is becoming critical, and we are reaching a grave and urgent need for clarity and time frames.

Mr Weir: It is a valid point, and I will make a couple of points about it. There needs to be something quite bespoke for the childcare and childminding sectors that takes into account the contribution it makes to schools but moves in a wider context. It is noticeable, since the scheme has been there, that there has been more limited interest in the approved childcarer scheme but much greater interest than we anticipated in the childminder side of it. To be fair to the Finance Department, they have given the scheme a level of flexibility on some of the spend to be

able to vary between the different sides of it. We also need to ensure that what is there can operate in the long run and will support that.

The points that have been made about broader support for all children are also critical. Something to bear in mind that, I think, the Executive will consider are the connections within families. At the moment, everything is centred very much on households. It may be that, although childminding responsibilities were previously taken on by grandparents, that is no longer applicable. We need to see where there can be flexibility. If there are, for example, other relatives who are in a position to provide childminding, we must not create artificial barriers such as saying that they cannot come into a house because they are neither a registered childminder nor a member of the household. That has to be part of the wider discussion as we look at the flexibility of the recovery.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members, another eight members wish to ask a question. There are 10 minutes left. I can keep the Minister here for slightly over an hour, but I cannot keep him here for an hour and a half. All the main government parties have been able to ask questions. Therefore, I will go to the bottom of the list before I return to this place on the list.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I appreciate that slight switch-around.

As the Minister will be aware, there is a growing campaign, given that we are in a global health pandemic, against post-primary examinations occurring this year or, indeed, ever again. I note the Minister's confirmation that he will not legislate to abolish the tests and will look at alternatives, if needed. Will he outline the exact powers that schools have to set admissions criteria for post-primary education?

Mr Weir: Among the criteria that schools have is the power to use the route of academic selection, and a range of schools want to do that. I am sure that we can provide the member with a more technical answer. I will be happy to do that, in the interests of brevity.

Miss Woods: On a different matter, will the Minister commit to involving and adequately resourcing the community and voluntary sector in all planning in conjunction with the Minister for Communities to help those facing holiday hunger this year? The sector plays a crucial part in helping families and children in local areas, as he will be aware.

Mr Weir: There is a critical role to be played by the community and voluntary sector. Ultimately, funding that sector is the responsibility of the Department for Communities. We are happy to work with them. At the moment, given all the challenges coming down the road, I probably do not have sufficient budget to cover all of those things. I am sure that the Minister for Communities would be happy for me to help out financially with it, but, unfortunately, we do not have the resources. Much of this is about imaginative thinking rather than purely resources.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Gerry Carroll.

Mr Carroll: Thank you for using your discretion.

I note that there has been a strong element of teacher bashing in England. I hope that that does not become the case here. As others have done, I pay tribute to teachers

and all education workers. They work hard throughout the year and are ready to return to work when it is safe to do so.

The Minister will, of course, be aware of the growing calls from students and their families and teachers to suspend the upcoming exams for this year. I commend and pay tribute to one such parent, Debbie Hughes Johnston, and her daughter, Ellie, who are challenging this through the courts. Instead of a pat on the back and a "Thank you" to our young people, who have heeded the public health measures, we are punishing them by forcing them to sit exams that, as we know, are in and of themselves very stressful. There is no evidence-based reason why the transfer test should continue, not only this year but indefinitely. Does the Minister not believe that, given the fact that GCSE and A-level exams have correctly been suspended for this year, we are, effectively, punishing primary 6 pupils by not doing the same for those expected to sit the transfer test later this year?

Mr Weir: The short answer is no. The position is that nobody is forced to sit any test. There is a limited amount I can say, given, as mentioned, the ongoing court challenge. I will highlight, irrespective of anyone's views on the nature of transfer and the nature of testing, the very different levels of data available for pupils of different ages. For pupils aged 16, 17 and 18, a wide range of data is available and can be used by CCEA to make a judgement on grades, with teacher assessment also involved. For pupils at primary school, the most robust data is from P5.

Mr Carroll: The reality is that having the transfer test later this year will exacerbate the class divide that already exists across classrooms, with those able to afford private tuition in an elevated and advantageous position. Those who are unable to afford extra tuition and resources and those with disabilities or with underlying health conditions who are likely to return to school later than September will be placed at further disadvantage. Effectively, what we are doing is labelling children as failures at the age of 11.

Mr Weir: I recognise the member's desire for a level playing field. Therefore, I am sure that he supports the decision that I made a few years ago to ensure that primary schools were given the freedom to prepare for the transfer test. I welcome his belated support for that preparation for the transfer test.

Mr Wells: I am glad that the Minister has not gone down the same route as Mr McNulty, Mr Hilditch, myself and you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, in having a savage haircut, which is an indication of the times. It will destroy all of our modelling careers for a good few months.

I must declare an interest because my daughter is about to have my second grandchild who, of course, will be the second most wonderful grandchild on the planet after the first one. What guidance has he given to those teachers — of course, it is a very predominantly young female workforce — who are expecting a baby in the next few months as to how they are going to deal with the obvious problems that they will encounter as a result of the virus?

Mr Weir: I am tempted to say that the first bit of advice is that there will probably not be a big cheque in the post for Jim Wells. *[Laughter.]* Specific public health guidance has already been offered on PPE, social distancing and a range of other things. As part of that, from the initial conversations that I have had with schoolteachers, it is

clear that they want a level of engagement and input into that but they also want the guidance to be as clear as possible, particularly on issues such as that, which will be driven by health considerations. We will look to cooperate closely with the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency in order to provide that bespoke guidance, particularly to those, for instance, who are pregnant, or those who have medical conditions. That will also be followed up in any guidance that is provided.

Mr Wells: The Department of Health has produced very useful guidance for its staff who are in a similar position. Would it be possible for the Minister to liaise with his colleagues in the Department to agree a joint policy?

Mr Weir: I know that specific advice has been provided and has been passed on. We will need to take a look at the applicability, and that is even before the limited opening of schools. As part of that, we will need to make sure that the advice that is there is applicable in a situation where a school is subject to phased opening and where a certain percentage of pupils will be in place. Some of that will involve a certain level of myth-busting because there will be people who, understandably, will be very concerned and, maybe, overly worried and will be looking for particular levels of protection that are not necessarily needed. It is about getting that reassurance and providing that guidance so that what is provided matches what is needed, particularly in the individual circumstances that were outlined.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for his statement. I acknowledge the work that is going on at the moment in all schools across the North and, indeed, farther afield. I say that as the sister of someone who is working as a teacher in England who made the decision at the start of the pandemic to stay over there to volunteer and to work one day a week.

As the Minister said, we will, at some stage, return to school openings and he mentioned the new normal. Can he give us an idea of the type of equipment, PPE and school sanitisation that will be required when we open and whether schools will receive notification of that?

Mr Weir: PPE stock is available at the moment. The Finance Minister, in cooperation with the Health Minister, made a pool of PPE stock available to other Departments and arm's-length bodies on request. That is something that has to be married to the need. I have given indications that detailed guidance will be provided. Precise requirements will need to be scoped out. Again, the specification that may be applicable in a primary school may not necessarily be exactly the same as that which is needed in a post-primary school. It is critical that a range of additional provision will be required. We will be working to scope that out while taking the clear-cut advice of health professionals, working alongside the likes of the trade unions to make sure that what is needed is got and is delivered on the ground.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you. So, you are saying that it will be provided for centrally. Will schools receive notification of who is responsible? For example, if schools have to be sanitised, will notification go out about who is responsible for carrying that out or will teaching staff and classroom assistants be expected to carry it out themselves?

Mr Weir: Whilst some schools will go out to those beyond the EA, most schools will use the Education Authority's

cleaning services. So far, additional costs for cleaning have already been met. Very clear guidance will be given to schools on what will be required and what provision will be made.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I thank you personally for dealing with the individual constituency queries that I sent you. I wish other Ministers were as diligent in dealing with individual requests from MLAs. Having said that, I associate myself with my colleague Chris Lyttle's earlier comments regarding the transfer test.

My question relates to children who attend key worker schools. I have a constituent whose eight-year-old son has autism and was arbitrarily told just last week that he could not return to school because he could not practice social distancing. What will you do about children with autism?

Mr Weir: I thank the member for her question, or at least the first 30 seconds of it.

One of the areas that we are looking at in the work streams is what particular provision will need to be made for children with special educational needs — not simply those within special schools — and, sometimes, those with medical needs. We need to ensure, therefore, that what is provided is tailored, as far as possible, for those needs on an individual basis.

Obviously, I am not aware of the specific case, but there is an acceptance that there will not be a one-size-fits-all solution, and we need to work out what provision can be made. Good work has been done with some of the special schools, but there anxiety remains around those schools. That is why an inter-disciplinary team for some children with critical needs is being considered.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for your answer. Moving on, when will you engage with the principals of those special educational needs schools on their reopening?

Mr Weir: That will be part of the process. As well as the broader strategic level, on which we will be looking for input, there are six work streams, one of which deals with special education. So, that will be very useful for discussion. Where school principals are looking to contact the Department of Education or contact me, I am always happy to get that information and have as many conversations as possible.

Mr Hilditch: I thank members and officers of the Assembly for their support, publicly and privately, over the past few days. Thank you.

Minister, thank you for the statement. You mentioned that the laptop provision will be prioritised to the disadvantaged and the vulnerable and to certain groups that will be doing their exams in the coming year. Is that part of a wider plan for mitigating educational loss for those key groups?

Mr Weir: Yes, very much so. The aim will be to make sure that there is provision for everyone. The point about prioritisation is to have some sequencing so that, as things become available, they are made available. The member mentioned mitigation on the basis of key examinations, which is something that seems to be accepted across different jurisdictions. At post-primary level, years 11 and 13, where people are starting their GCSEs and A levels, are seen as the most important cohorts. I suspect that that is why those cohorts and those who are in the

transition year and the final year of primary school will be concentrated on for an earlier start than others.

The IT side is one element of the broader response. Again, part of this is trying to be as inventive with resources as possible. There will also be a broader challenge, which will be accepted across different jurisdictions, in that there will probably need to be some alteration to the curriculum as we move ahead. No matter how good the work that is being done is, there will be some implications for the curriculum. That will need to be accepted on a wider basis and it is likely to be, but it will have implications, not just for here but for other jurisdictions as well.

Mr Hilditch: I will not delay the Minister any further; he has a busy schedule.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): A sentiment that I am sure will be shared by Mr Philip McGuigan.

Mr McGuigan: Before I ask my question, I want to put on record, on behalf of me and my party, our condemnation of the threat that was made to Mr Hilditch earlier in the week.

Minister, thank you for your statement and the sentiments in it, particularly, as others indicated, those about the fact that schools reopening must be led by medical and scientific evidence to ensure the safety of staff and pupils alike. It is pretty clear, even at this stage, that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to the preparation for opening schools. Different schools in different settings will require different criteria, whether it is because of the number of pupils enrolled, because of the space internally and outside the school or because, as you said, the issues with transport to and from schools and the resources available. Does the Minister agree with that sentiment and will individual schools be allowed flexibility in their preparation of determining how they can reopen safely?

Mr Weir: The member raises a very good point. There is a balance. We must try to have a level of flexibility in individual circumstances, and it may well be that that will be over certain practical arrangements. Balanced against that, when I talk about different positions, it may well be that the approach that you take to 15-year-olds will be different to the approach you take to five-year-olds, for instance. Therefore, there may well be a level of divergence between what is done precisely, for instance, in primary and post-primary schools. That may be more in terms of what way weeks are scheduled.

There will be limitations on the level of flexibility because we also want to ensure that there is consistency among schools. For example, we do not want, in one school, such-and-such a year group to be in school four days a week and only at home one day a week but, in another school two miles down the road, because of its circumstances, children of the same age are in on only one day a week. I do not particularly want to take a Stalinist-type approach, which may disappoint Mr Carroll —.

Mr Carroll: *[Inaudible]*

Mr Weir: What, sorry?

Mr Carroll: I am not a Stalinist.

Mr Weir: That is good to know, or whatever.

From that point of view, it cannot be a command economy that dictates down, but I want to see at least a level of consistency while allowing that flexibility. The member

raises a valid point, and how we get that balance right will be a very tricky question. It may well be that whatever is there on day one or week one has to be adjusted as we move ahead, because, no matter how much preparation work is done and no matter how much good thinking and consensus there is, will everything be right on the first day or will there be teething problems? Do we know precisely what to expect? The answer to those questions is that it is likely that there will be some adjustments.

Mr McGuigan: I would not ask the Minister to take a Stalinist approach, but perhaps he could read some of Marx's writings.

Following on from my constituency colleague's comments about additional resources probably being required, in some instances, extra resources will be required, particularly extra support for special schools and schools containing pupils with special needs.

Mr Weir: Again, it is a valid point. I am probably more of a Menshevik than a Bolshevik in that regard. There will undoubtedly be some areas where there are additional pressures that will need some additional resources. To some extent, there will have to be creative thinking to work out where the budget for it lies. I do not mean this facetiously, but if the member is able to work alongside the Minister of Finance and persuade him to provide some of that budget, I would be extremely grateful. I want to make sure that people do not have a wrong assumption that there will be a large amount of additional resources, but, clearly, there will be some pressure, as you mentioned.

On the issue of entitlement to free school meals and where we are with uniform grants, even if there is no change to any of the criteria, there will be additional demands on those, which, rightly, will have to be met. Leaving aside the teaching side of it, there are likely to be additional pressures on things such as additional cleaning materials, but that may also generate some easements in the system. I suspect that the easements will be far outweighed by the additional cost, so it is a mixture of trying to see from where additional resources can be got and where they can be effectively recycled.

Mr O'Toole: I join others in condemning the appalling threats made against Mr Hilditch. It is good to see him here today facing down that unacceptable behaviour.

Minister, I will make two statements that I presume you will not disagree with. First, every single piece of available evidence shows that poorer kids have worse outcomes from the 11-plus and transfer tests; and secondly, basically everyone agrees that poorer kids are more vulnerable to worse educational outcomes as a result of this crisis and the shutdown. That is evidenced by the fact that your Department has taken very welcome steps to mitigate that. Do you therefore agree, following those two statements, that proceeding with transfer tests this year will mean that poorer kids do worse?

Mr Weir: With respect, I am not prepared to write off children. Undoubtedly, there are inequalities in society, and, where we can, we have to try to mitigate them. My concern is partly driven by a belief that if there is no opportunity for academic selection we will move, whether it is in the short term or the long term, much more to the situation that we see in England and other places. Selection will happen in some shape or form, because

there will always be schools that are oversubscribed and some that are undersubscribed.

If we move to a situation in which academic selection is removed, we move to a scenario in which it is much more likely that we will see the development of people with the ability to pay to go to the best schools. There are undoubtedly concerns about whether there is a level playing field. The member is right about that; I do not disagree. The issue is whether we take steps that will create a system in which that playing field becomes more level or it becomes something that, if we remove academic selection, the advantage of money makes more uneven.

Given where we are, if there is to be academic selection there will need to be some formal test, and that is axiomatic. The situation means that we have to put in place as many measures as possible to help all children, irrespective of whether they are doing the test, to recover from the disruption to the continuity of learning. Are we going to be in a situation that is not perfect? I do not think that anybody is pretending otherwise.

Mr O'Toole: Just briefly, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I take it from that answer that the Minister does not dissent from the statements that I made, and I am grateful for that. Has a single parents' group, teaching union or other relevant stakeholder group got in touch with him to say that they support transfer tests proceeding this autumn?

Mr Weir: Yes, parents have certainly been in touch. The teaching unions have a long-standing position. It will not come as a great surprise to learn that pretty much all teaching unions have at least an official position against academic selection, which is very sincerely held. I appreciate that there are different views on it across the Chamber, but if I was to find a teaching union in current circumstances that has suddenly reversed its opinion and is supportive of academic selection, it would be something of a Damascene conversion. I am not anticipating it.

However, amongst parents there is a wide range of views. Set against that are the practicalities. A lot of parents will express the view that they would like to see the test put off but are still in favour of academic selection. As I indicated, the problem with that is doing it in a timescale that enables people to transfer properly. Transfer from primary to post-primary is a complex process. It is not something that can simply be truncated to a couple of weeks. I think that the problem is the issue of timing.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Thank you, Minister. That concludes questions on the statement.

Mr Lyttle: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Yes.

Mr Lyttle: You, fairly, reminded me of my responsibility not to speak from a seated position, and I am grateful, genuinely, for the expert job that you are doing in chairing these sessions. However, to be fair, the Minister of Education wholly misrepresented my question — on contingency plans and the suspension of post-primary transfer for 2020 — as a call to ban grammar education. Will you be reminding the Education Minister of his responsibility not to misrepresent Members of the Assembly in order to divert from the inadequacy of his action on matters of public concern?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The member may ask a question, and the Minister may not like the question; the member will get an answer, and the member may not like the answer. It is not the role of the Chair to determine on the content of questions or answers. I do not think that that was a point of order, strictly speaking, but you have got your comments into Hansard and they are on the record.

Agenda item 3 is the time, date and place of our next meeting. We have yet to receive confirmation from the Executive about when Ministers will next come to make statements to the Committee. As soon as confirmation has been received, written notification of the time, date and place of our next meeting will be issued to members in the usual way.

I remind members that a plenary session of the Assembly is scheduled to take place on Tuesday 2 June and that Ministers may continue to make oral statements to the Assembly on sitting days.

That concludes the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. Stay safe.

Written Answers

This section contains the written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 1 May 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr McCrossan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) why their approach to COVID-19 differs from that in the Republic of Ireland; and (ii) whether the Executive Office has engaged with the Irish Government to find an all-island approach to COVID-19.
(AQW 3657/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Any differences in approach between the Executive and the Irish Government reflect differences in the assessments of the medical and scientific evidence and/or the progress of the disease outbreak in the respective jurisdictions.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister, accompanied by the Minister for Health and the Chief Medical Officer, met the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, and the Irish Prime Minister for Health and Chief Medical Officer on 14 March.

This is part of ongoing close co-operation to tackle the pandemic.

Mr Blair asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to mitigate any delay, as a result of COVID-19, in introducing legislation that needs to be in place before the end of March 2020.
(AQO 367/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: There was no Executive legislation which needed to be in place before the end of March 2020. Mitigation measures were therefore not required.

Ms Kimmins asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of the Maze Long Kesh site.
(AQO 369/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We recognise the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site and will endeavour to develop a way forward that can maximise this potential.

The Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation continues to maintain the site and to support the tenants.

The Helicopter Emergency Medical Service, the Ulster Aviation Society and the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society are all located on the site and bring health, social and economic benefits to the area and beyond.

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to specify the date on which each contract for personal protection equipment was signed since 1 March 2020, identifying the contracting parties.
(AQW 3923/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Details of all contracts awarded for PPE since 1 March 2020 are provided in the table below. Contracts awarded for Health and Social Care NI, Translink, NI Water, Education Authority or NI Housing Executive have not been included as they are awarded through their own Centre of Procurement Expertise.

The details of the suppliers to the Department of Justice (DoJ), including Police Service NI (PSNI), Forensic Science NI (FSNI), NI Prison Service (NIPS) and Probation Service cannot be provided as in accordance with Regulation 50 (6)(a) of the Public Contract Regulations 2015 and normal operating procedures, information on suppliers is withheld for security reasons.

DfI awarded two contracts to Echlinville Distillery on 7 and 8 April 2020.

Dept/Contracting Authority	Order/Contract date
PSNI	19-Mar-20

Dept/Contracting Authority	Order/Contract date
PSNI	19-Mar-20
PSNI	20-Mar-20
PSNI	20-Mar-20
PSNI	20-Mar-20
FSNI	20-Mar-20
PSNI	23-Mar-20
PSNI	24-Mar-20
PSNI	25-Mar-20
PSNI	26-Mar-20
PSNI	26-Mar-20
PSNI	26-Mar-20
PSNI	27-Mar-20
PSNI	27-Mar-20
PSNI	27-Mar-20
PSNI	27-Mar-20
PSNI	31-Mar-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	01-Apr-20
PSNI	03-Apr-20
PSNI	06-Apr-20
PSNI	06-Apr-20
PSNI	07-Apr-20
Dfl	07-Apr-20
Dfl	08-Apr-20
DOJ	08-Apr-20
DOJ	08-Apr-20
NIPS	09-Apr-20
NIPS	09-Apr-20
NIPS	09-Apr-20
NIPS	09-Apr-20
NIPS	09-Apr-20
DOJ	10-Apr-20
DOJ	10-Apr-20
DOJ	10-Apr-20

Dept/Contracting Authority	Order/Contract date
DOJ	10-Apr-20
NIPS	15-Apr-20
NIPS	15-Apr-20
NIPS	15-Apr-20
PSNI	16-Apr-20
NIPS	16-Apr-20
Probation Service	16-Apr-20
DOJ	16-Apr-20
NIPS	16-Apr-20
NIPS	16-Apr-20
NIPS	16-Apr-20
NIPS	16-Apr-20
PSNI	17-Apr-20
PSNI	20-Apr-20
PSNI	20-Apr-20

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how many deaths have been certified as COVID-19 deaths without positive tests for the disease.

(AQW 3941/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Based on most up to date published information, the best NISRA estimate of deaths certified as COVID-19 without positive tests is 64 at 17th April 2020. This figure is based on the differencing of two key but unlinked sources and therefore may be subject to some error.

NISRA publishes weekly, registration based death statistics. These include the number of COVID-19 related deaths, identified by any mention of COVID-19 on the death certificate. They include suspect and probable cases. Published NISRA figures show that 276 deaths involving COVID-19 had occurred by 17th April 2020.

The Department of Health (DoH) reported 212 deaths at that date. DoH receive these data from Trusts which are based on deaths occurring within 28 days of a positive test for COVID-19 whether or not the cause of death was COVID-19.

Department of Health

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to outline any concerns he has raised with the PSNI concerning its approach to policing COVID-19 regulations, including in respect of the policing of Republican funerals.

(AQW 3924/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what action his Department has taken to strengthen prevention, control, and preparedness for future pandemics since the publication of the World Health Organisation's Global Influenza Strategy for 2019-2030 in March 2019.

(AQW 3925/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what action his Department has taken to support the development of evidence to strengthen public health guidance and actions essential for limiting the impact of pandemic, zoonotic and seasonal epidemic influenza since the World Health Organisation developed the Public Health Research Agenda for Influenza in 2009.

(AQW 3926/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether his Department raised any concerns that the findings of Exercise Cygnus in 2016 were classified; and for his assessment of the implications this might have for the Health Service and Northern Ireland general public.

(AQW 3927/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he is aware of any formal discussions with his Department relating to the public concerns raised by UK Chief Medical Officer Dame Sally Davies, following Exercise Cygnus in 2016, about shortages of personal protective equipment, ventilators and critical care beds across the NHS.

(AQW 3928/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the response to coronavirus.
(AQW 3929/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what discussions have taken place with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, or via the respective chief medical advisers, about Dublin Airport continuing to operate flights from places with high levels of COVID-19, including New York, without health checks, given the ease of onward travel into Northern Ireland.
(AQW 3931/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to Regulation 2(3) of The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (NI) 2020, what consideration he has given to acting to remove the restriction in Regulation 4(8) on the closure of burial grounds; and whether he will act to remove this restriction.
(AQW 3934/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as

developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether (i) she will ensure changing places toilets will be mandatory in all new public facilities on the back of the budget announcement; and (ii) she will investigate the retrofit of government facilities within the remainder of this present mandate.

(AQW 3575/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): As the responsibility for building regulations lies with the Department of Finance, I refer the member to AQW 463/17-22 which was recently answered by Minister Conor Murphy on this matter.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the statement from Translink on 6 March 2020 that there has been no increase in passport and identity checks on cross-border buses, to detail the figures for such checks, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3636/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink has advised that its drivers are instructed to comply with any instruction to stop their buses by appropriate authorities, such as Government agencies, who are carrying out their statutory duties in their relevant jurisdictions in accordance with Passenger Carrying Vehicle regulations. However, Translink does not record or report on these and consequently it does not have figures for passport and identity checks on cross-border bus services. As all the recent checks have been carried out in the Republic of Ireland, the member may wish to contact An Garda Síochána for these statistics.

Department of Justice

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, in respect of contract 2020/S 074-177458 for occupational clothing, special workwear and accessories for Forensic Science Northern Ireland, to specify (i) the date(s) on which the contract notice was issued and published on the EU's TED system; (ii) what date was set for the close of tenders; (iii) whether the order was motivated by, or related to, the COVID-19 crisis; and (iv) when is any personal protection equipment arising from this order due to be delivered.

(AQW 3939/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):

- (i) The Department of Finance published a tender for PPE and consumables on behalf of FSNI. Notice dispatched on 18/10/2019, published on eTenders 20/10/2019, published on TED 24/10/2019.
- (ii) The closing date for tenders was 21 November 2019.
- (iii) The procurement was instigated prior to COVID-19 to replace a PPE and consumable contract which was due to expire.
- (iv) No confirmed date for delivery is currently available from the supplier.

Department for the Economy

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider amending the Health and Safety Regulation 2017, to make provision for mental health first aid training in the workplace.

(AQW 2027/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): As a sitting member of the Executive sub-committee on mental wellbeing I am aware that significant activity in the area of managing mental wellbeing at work, across a range of sectors, is already being carried out by the Mental Wellbeing at Work Advisory Service which is part of the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI). They work alongside a number of other organisations to increase the reach of their work.

A Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training programme was first developed in Australia to train the public in providing help to adults with mental ill-health problems. Subsequently MHFA training has been taken up by other countries including the United Kingdom. Research work¹, via a rapid scoping evidence review, was published in 2018 by the

1 RR1135 HSE Research Report – Summary of the evidence on the effectiveness of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training in the workplace

Health and Safety Executive in Great Britain (HSE GB). The report concluded, that based on published research it was not possible to state whether MHFA training is effective in a workplace setting to improve the organisational management of mental-ill health. Furthermore it found no evidence that the introduction of MHFA training in workplaces had resulted in sustained actions in those trained, or that it had improved the wider management of mental ill-health. Indeed the review found limited evidence that the content of MHFA training had been adapted for workplace circumstances. It also noted that there were only a small number of published occupational studies that had addressed mental health first-aid and these had design and quality limitations.

However on a more positive note, the HSE GB research showed consistent evidence that MHFA training does raise employees' awareness of mental ill-health conditions including signs and symptoms. Those trained had a better understanding of where to find information and professional support, and were more confident in helping individuals experiencing mental ill-health or a crisis.

Making provision for MHFA training in Northern Ireland workplaces is likely to place a significant financial burden on employers. Without a sufficient evidence base currently to support its effectiveness, I am not minded to amend the current First Aid at Work Regulations. I do acknowledge though, that with further research work in this area, evidence may well change over time and I would be willing to reconsider my position in this regard.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how much has her Department paid for the auditing of non-domestic RHI boilers.

(AQW 2292/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that the Department holds the information requested. However, it is not possible to release this particular information due to the commercially sensitive nature given that disclosure would prejudice the commercial interests of a contractor on the Framework Agreement in place.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy what financial provision she plans to provide in 2020/21 and 2021/22 to address the climate and biodiversity crisis.

(AQW 2312/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department is represented at official level on the Future Generations group under the chairmanship of Minister Poots in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to consider how the Executive can respond across all areas of devolved responsibility to the issues associated with climate change. I anticipate that a plan will be brought before the Executive in due course with proposals for appropriate funding to address the issues and the opportunities to tackle the challenges as provided for in the New Decade New Approach proposals.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy whether the Ulster University Magee expansion proposals can be realised, if the financial difficulties experienced by Ulster University at their Belfast development project are not addressed.

(AQW 2603/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As noted in the NIAO's Major Capital Projects Report published on 19th December 2019, Ulster University is experiencing a funding gap in its Greater Belfast Development project. Failure to provide conditional financial assistance would create significant instability in the organisation as a whole, which would create a risk that any potential Magee expansion could not happen.

As regards Magee expansion, my Department is yet to receive updated proposals from the University.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the constituencies that Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) staff located Belfast are required to inspect; and (ii) the constituencies that HSENI staff located Omagh are required to inspect.

(AQW 3248/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Whilst HSENI inspectorate staff are located in the Belfast and Omagh offices they are warranted to operate throughout Northern Ireland. HSENI deploy staff flexibly to ensure that all areas are covered by existing resources.

In some work sectors (e.g. construction, agriculture, manufacturing etc.), inspectorate staff in the Omagh office mostly, but not exclusively, cover the constituency areas of Fermanagh & South Tyrone, and West Tyrone.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has arranged any meetings with the management of the George Best City Airport to discuss the collapse of Flybe.

(AQW 3315/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On the morning of 5 March 2020, following the news that Flybe had filed for insolvency with all flights being cancelled, I met the Chief Executive of Belfast City Airport to discuss the issue. Subsequently, on 10 March 2020, the Permanent Secretary of my Department had a further meeting with the Chief Executive Officer of the Airport.

I and officials from my Department will continue to work closely with the Airport in the forthcoming days and weeks, as maintaining our connectivity to mainland GB is vital to Northern Ireland.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how many people work in her Department's Energy Branch, broken down by grade; (ii) how many are classed or termed as generalists; and (iv) how these figures compare with (a) 2015; and (b) 2010. (AQW 3394/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

(i) As at 2 March 2020, the number of staff in post in Energy Group, broken down by grade, is as follows:

Grade	Number	Notes
Under Secretary (Grade 3)	1	SIB secondment
Assistant Secretary (Grade 5)	2	1 - temporarily promoted from Grade 6
Senior Principal (Grade 6)	2	-
Energy Consultant	1	SIB secondment
Principal Accountant	1	-
Principal (Grade 7)	20	3 - temporarily promoted from Deputy Principal
Accountant (Deputy Principal)	6	1 - Agency staff
Deputy Principal	22	3 - temporarily promoted from Staff Officer 1 - Agency staff
Staff Officer (Accountant)	1	-
Staff Officer	19	2 - temporarily promoted from EO1 3 - Agency staff
HPTO (M&E Engineer Assistant)	1	-
Assistant Economist	1	-
Executive Officer 1	7	1 - temporarily promoted from EO11
Executive Office 11	15	1 temporarily promoted from AO
Personal Secretary	1	-
Administrative Officer	14	-
Typist	1	-
Total	115	

(ii) Of the 115 staff in Energy Group, 99 work at General Service grades. Of these 99, 17 staff have either worked in Energy Group for over 5 years or were recruited through specialist rather than general service promotion competitions. Therefore, 33 staff currently working in Energy Group are deemed by Senior Management to have expertise in their respective fields.

(iii) (a) The total number of staff in Energy Division as at May 2015 was 39.

(b) The total number of staff in Energy Division as at June 2010 was 30.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy, of the 20,342 Invest NI jobs created since 2010, how many still exist. (AQW 3416/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI moved to Outcome Based Accountability (OBA) Reporting in 2017, in line with the draft Programme for Government. The agency now measures the impact of its support based on key performance indicators (KPIs) gathered from a cohort of businesses with which it works most intensely. The agency now tracks the number of additional jobs these companies create each calendar year.

The 20,342 jobs referred to in the question were additional jobs created by businesses supported by Invest NI in the 2017 and 2018 calendar years. This figure is taken from company employment records and represents the most up to date position at the time of reporting, in June 2019. These numbers are updated and reported once a year. Figures for the 2019 calendar year will be available later in 2020.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy to detail assistance being provided to staff made redundant as a result of the collapse of Flybe.

(AQW 3488/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Following a commercial decision by the company, on 5 March 2020 Flybe filed for insolvency with all flights being cancelled.

Redundancy Payments Service (RPS) staff met with Unite Union and Flybe representatives at the Unite premises on the morning of 5th March following the announcement of administration. RPS advised that they would contribute to any subsequent meetings/clinics, etc, to help with completion of Redundancy Claim forms and to answer any queries regarding redundancy and insolvency payments, and provided the RP1 Redundancy Application forms for distribution to the ex-employees.

The Department for the Economy's Careers Service is also working with the Department for Communities to support Flybe workers facing redundancy.

Starting from Monday 9th March, the Careers Service has been attending a series of redundancy clinics to provide professional and impartial careers

information, advice and guidance tailored to the individual needs of the Flybe employees. RPS will also attend these clinics.

The Careers Service will keep in contact with those who request ongoing support, which can be provided by careers advisers either face to face, using telephony, email and webchat.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy when the audit carried out into the sustainable energy scheme will be published.

(AQW 3506/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This answer has been completed on the assumption that the member is referring to the investigative review currently being conducted by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) on emerging issues from generating electricity from renewable energy. NIAO has advised that it is their intention to publish the report by the end of April 2020.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the number of clinical medical staff employed or contracted at Queen's University, Belfast, and each campus of Ulster University, broken down by role; and (ii) her assessment of the clinical medical resource at each university to deal with COVID-19.

(AQW 3515/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not hold information on staffing at the universities; you may wish to contact the universities directly.

In regards to an assessment of the clinical medical resource at each university, the Department of Health is best placed to provide this.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the preparedness of networks and providers to ensure internet provision in circumstances of increased demand due to the delay phase in response to COVID-19; (ii) how she is engaging with providers to ensure they are supporting consumers, in particular those who will be required to work from home during this phase.

(AQW 3582/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Telecoms is a reserved matter led by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Westminster. DCMS is responsible for responding to concerns about the security and resilience of UK networks, incident management and preparedness for the continuity of service for the telecoms sector.

DCMS advises that the telecoms industry is well experienced in managing surges in internet usage, and expects to be able to do so in the event of an increase in home working.

- (ii) The Department for the Economy is a member of the UK's Electronic Communications Resilience and Response Group (ECRRG). This group is comprised of representatives from all the major UK telecoms providers, DCMS, Ofcom, Cabinet Office, the wider UK Government, and the Devolved Administrations.

All networks are operating as expected. DCMS and ECRRG monitor the networks' operations closely and continuously and will update DfE as and when necessary.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail what stakeholder organisations and individuals she has engaged with relating to Brexit since taking up post.

(AQW 3613/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since taking up post, I have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders on EU Exit issues. Earlier this month I attended my Department's EU Exit Stakeholder Forum which included senior representatives from the business community, the voluntary & community sector, universities, colleges, and trade unions.

I have also engaged with a number of stakeholders on EU Exit on a one to one basis including the NI Chamber of Commerce, the Institute of Directors, Retail NI, and the NI Meat Exporters Association. Last month I also spoke at Lisburn Chamber of Commerce's "Economic Review & Brexit Update" event.

I have also engaged with high level stakeholders in UK, Scottish and Welsh governments and the European Union. This has included meetings with Michel Barnier, Head of Task Force for Relations with the UK, Conor Burns, Minister of State for the Department for International Trade, and UK, Scottish and Welsh Government Ministers through the Ministerial Forum on Energy and Climate Change issues.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) how the Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement, entitled Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, will help protect the all-Ireland economy; and (ii) what steps she is taking to increase the capacity of local businesses to understand how the protocol will affect their business model in the future.

(AQW 3615/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) It is vital to the Northern Ireland economy that we have no barriers to trade east-west or north-south. That is the reason I am continuing to press the UK Government to meet its commitments to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland's businesses to our largest market in the UK and to engage with the Executive on measures to protect and strengthen our place in the UK internal market.

Whilst it is important that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland continue to co-operate on areas of mutual economic interest, I have no plans to develop an all-island economy.

- (ii) The major impediment to businesses understanding the potential impact of the Protocol, is the lack of clarity around how it will be implemented. I have consistently raised this issue with UK Government and will continue to do so. I understand that it is difficult for businesses to plan for how the Protocol will affect their business models until there is clarity. I have been engaging closely with our business community on this and will continue to do so.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether (i) the Ulster University; and (ii) Queen's University funds or contributes to any sporting clubs which are active on campus; and, if so, how much they have paid to each club in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3681/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not hold this information, you may wish to contact the universities directly to provide the information requested.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of students from (i) Great Britain; (ii) the Republic of Ireland; (iii) other EU Member states; and (iv) the rest of the world who have enrolled in (a) Queen's University; and (b) the Ulster University in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3682/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

Enrolments at QUB and UU (exc. NI domiciled) by domicile – 2014/15 to 2018/19

Institution and Academic Year		Domicile			
		GB	RoI	Other EU	Non EU
QUB	2014/15	1,160	755	185	1,650
	2015/16	1,270	720	215	1,870
	2016/17	1,405	720	220	2,125
	2017/18	1,565	740	255	2,610
	2018/19	1,610	780	245	2,755
UU	2014/15	1,660	1,540	200	1,145
	2015/16	1,655	1,435	160	715
	2016/17	1,745	1,345	165	685
	2017/18	1,620	1,340	190	575
	2018/19	1,845	1,435	170	750

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- 1 Data has been obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). HESA is the official agency for the collection of information on publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK.

- 2 To prevent the identification of individuals, figures have been rounded to the nearest 5, in line with HESA rounding strategy, with 0, 1 and 2 rounded to 0.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm what actions she will take to ensure employers of people with disabilities on work programmes or apprenticeships will be appropriately supported and guidance provided to ensure they understand why they may be asked not to attend work or to work from home during the COVID-19 delay phase.
(AQW 3785/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My department has separate contracts with Disability Support Services who work closely with the Training Contractors, Apprentices and their employers to provide support as appropriate to the apprentice's individual need while they are in the classroom or directed training environment.

This support includes mentoring on a one to one basis to increase and improve an apprentice's confidence, self-esteem and value, enabling them to progress within their training.

This support would include guidance as appropriate from their mentor / support worker as to why they may not be able to attend work or work from home during the COVID-19 delay phase.

My Department has encouraged Disability Support Service providers to work with their partner Training Organisations to identify ways that Apprentices requiring support can continue to be engaged and supported remotely during this period when face-to-face training has been suspended due to COVID-19.

As the apprentices are in employment when they start on the programme the in work support comes under the remit of the Department for Communities through its disability programmes.

My Department has provided information for employers and employees on the support available using the following web links.

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-guidance-employers>

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-workers>

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy to provide her assessment of the broadband capabilities across Northern Ireland and whether it will be able to meet the needs of employees and exam students who are working from home during the COVID-19 delay phase.
(AQW 3786/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Telecoms is a reserved matter led by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Westminster. DCMS is responsible for responding to concerns about the security and resilience of UK networks, incident management and preparedness for the continuity of service for the telecoms sector.

DCMS advises that the telecoms industry is well experienced in managing surges in internet usage, and expects to be able to do so in the event of an increase in home working.

The Department for the Economy is a member of the UK's Electronic Communications Resilience and Response Group (ECRRG). This group is comprised of representatives from all the major UK telecoms providers, DCMS, Ofcom, Cabinet Office, the wider UK Government, and the Devolved Administrations.

All networks are operating as expected. DCMS and ECRRG monitor the networks' operations closely and continuously and will update DfE as and when necessary.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy to consider raising the statutory minimum limits on redundancy pay.
(AQW 3791/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The statutory minimum limits on redundancy pay are set out in the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. The amount payable is dependent upon age, length of service and contractual earnings. In addition, the calculation for weekly pay is subject to the statutory limit of £547, reviewed annually and rising to £560 from 6 April 2020. The maximum number of years that can be taken into account in a redundancy payment calculation is 20 years.

I would reassure you that I am acutely aware of the situation faced by anyone potentially facing redundancy due to the impact of the Coronavirus. While there are no immediate plans to amend legislation in relation to redundancy in Northern Ireland, the introduction of the UK-wide job retention scheme introduced by the Chancellor on Friday will allow employers to retain their employees on payroll, rather than being laid off or made redundant.

This scheme allows employers to claim a grant of up to 80% of wages up to a cap of £2,500 per month. The UK Government intends for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to run for at least 3 months from 1 March 2020, but will extend the Scheme if necessary.

I will, of course, continue to monitor developments, and UK-wide policy announcements, emanating from the Treasury and, along with my Executive colleagues, will seek to deliver all measures which assist all our people.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy whether the proper collective consultation processes were carried out in relation to the Beannchor Group lay-offs.

(AQW 3793/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As the member will appreciate, it would be inappropriate for me to comment in detail on matters relating to individual businesses. However, I understand that Beannchor Group decided to furlough 800 members of staff around the 24th March.

I reassure you that I am acutely aware of the situation faced by anyone potentially facing redundancy due to the impact of the Coronavirus. I would encourage all businesses that need to take advantage of the UK-wide job retention scheme which was announced by the Chancellor on 20 March and opened on 20 April 2020. The Scheme should allow employers to retain their employees on payroll, rather than being laid off or made redundant.

This scheme allows employers to claim a grant of up to 80% of wages, up to a cap of £2,500 per month. Staff whose salary is reduced as a result of these changes may also be eligible for support through the welfare system, including Universal Credit. The UK Government intends for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to run until the end of June 2020.

On the issue of consultation in general, the Member may wish to note that consultation processes are required by statute in cases of collective redundancy when proposals are first being developed and a number of days prior to the first redundancy. This is dictated by the number of redundancies to be made.

There are not, however, statutory consultation requirements in cases of temporary lay-offs but it would be considered good practice for an employer to engage with staff and their representatives prior to any temporary lay-offs being made.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy to ask the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland to consider the World Health Organisation analysis of COVID-19 when publishing workplace guidance for employers.

(AQW 3794/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that HSENI has been monitoring the WHO website in relation to COVID-19 on a daily basis since the 11/03/2020 to identify any specific guidance, which is not currently addressed in Public Health England or PHA guidance documents, relevant to workplace health and safety.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy what support and advice she will issue to employers and employees in the event of redundancies due to the impact of governments response to COVID-19.

(AQW 3800/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I reassure you that I am acutely aware of the situation faced by anyone potentially facing redundancy due to the impact of the Coronavirus. I would encourage all businesses that need to take advantage of the UK-wide job retention scheme introduced by the Chancellor on Friday, which should allow employers to retain their employees on payroll, rather than being laid off or made redundant.

This scheme allows employers to claim a grant of up to 80% of wages up to a cap of £2,500 per month. Staff whose salary is reduced as a result of these changes may also be eligible for support through the welfare system, including Universal Credit. The UK Government intends for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to run for at least 3 months from 1 March 2020, but will extend the scheme if necessary.

I will, of course, continue to monitor developments, and UK-wide policy announcements emanating from the Treasury and, along with my Executive colleagues, will seek to deliver all measures which assist all our people.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy how changes to employment contracts as a response to the impact of COVID-19, will not prejudice employee rights under current contracts.

(AQW 3801/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am acutely aware of the difficulties many employers and workers are facing during these difficult times and I am aware that many workers may be facing a period of temporary lay-off. Employers must agree any changes that may be needed to employment contracts with their employees as necessary. All employment contracts must at least meet the statutory minimum standards as set out in the framework of employment law.

I am hopeful that the introduction of the UK-wide job retention scheme introduced by the Chancellor on 20 March 2020 will allow employers to retain their employees on payroll, rather than being temporarily laid off or made redundant.

This scheme allows employers to claim a grant of up to 80% of wages up to a cap of £2,500 per month. The UK Government intends for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to run for at least 3 months from 1 March 2020, but will extend the Scheme if necessary.

The UK Government advises that employers accessing the scheme will need to designate affected employees as 'furloughed workers' and notify their employees of this change. Changing the status of employees remains subject to existing employment law, and depending on the employment contract, may be subject to negotiation.

I will, of course, continue to monitor developments, and UK-wide policy announcements, emanating from the Treasury and, along with my Executive colleagues, will seek to deliver all measures which assist all our people.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 1330/17-22, whether the cost of this irregular spend, £46.7m to March of last year, is, as the Comptroller and Auditor General has indicated at para 48 of the DfE Resource Accounts 2016/17, to be borne by the Department's DEL arising from the NI Block grant and, if this is the case, is this the true driver for the proposed closure of DfE RHI Scheme, under New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 3820/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The paragraph referred to in the 2016/17 DfE Accounts makes no reference to DEL or AME and the assertion that irregular spend must be met from DfE's DEL is incorrect. Irregular spend does not distinguish between AME and DEL. For instance, in 2018/19 while £8.1m of spend on the Non-Domestic RHI scheme was deemed irregular, there was no DEL impact.

The irregular spend referred to is not a principle factor in considering the future of the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether the contract manager for the BUGLASS Review had any role in the drafting or the approval of the regulatory impact assessments required for the passage of the 2019 legislation.

(AQW 3821/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The piece of work referred to was managed by two officials, one of whom had a role in respect of the impact assessments prepared ahead of the 2019 legislation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether her staff have given thought to how uncertainty regarding the future of the Renewable Heat Incentive created by the stated intent within New Decade, New Approach to close the scheme might manifest itself as a behavioural change by the operators of the 2,700 domestic scheme participants and the 2,128 non-domestic scheme system users for whom reversion to fossil fuels is now simpler, more cost-effective, but, polluting and environmentally damaging alternative.

(AQW 3822/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The domestic RHI scheme is not considered within scope of the reference to RHI contained in New Decade, New Approach.

The future of the Non-Domestic RHI scheme is a priority and I want to find a way forward that is fair to RHI participants that have acted in good faith but also to taxpayers who are funding the scheme. The impact on participants and the potential for reversion to fossil fuels is one of the issues under consideration.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what preparations her Department has made to address the impact on Northern Ireland's universities and further education colleges resulting from COVID-19 and the likely reduction in their income through the loss of overseas students and vocational training contracts from businesses.

(AQW 3839/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: At this stage it is too early to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher and further education sectors, and it would not be appropriate to make any comment on the potential financial or student recruitment implications at this time or in relation to current training contracts. Departmental officials have been in regular communication with senior management across the HE and FE sector and will continue to work closely with the universities and colleges to assess all of the impacts of COVID-19 and to put in place mitigating measures as appropriate over the following weeks and months.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy what commitments local banks have given to her Department in relation to making new funds available to business impacted by COVID-19 disruption.

(AQW 3851/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The UK Government, Bank of England, and Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) have put in place a package of measures with the aim of keeping credit flowing via the financial sector and providing businesses with support to protect jobs. These schemes are delivered by the British Business Bank (BBB).

The Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) is a major vehicle for the local banks to make new funds available to businesses with turnover up to £45m, who are suffering disruption to their cashflow due to lost or deferred revenues during the Covid-19 outbreak. On 6 April 2020 CBILS was significantly expanded along with changes to the scheme's features and eligibility criteria. The changes mean that more smaller businesses across NI, which have been impacted by the coronavirus crisis can access the funding they need. All of the main local banks here are already accredited, or in the process of being accredited on the CBILS. A number of UK Banks (HSBC, Barclays and Santander) are also accredited lenders present in NI.

The Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CLBILS) provides finance to mid-sized and larger UK businesses with turnover above £45m. The scheme went operational with lenders from Monday 20 April 2020. Danske Bank, HSBC and Barclays are accredited lenders present in NI

Department of Finance officials are in regular contact with the local banking sector, in particular UK Finance's NI Committee Chairman, and the sector has indicated it is taking steps to implement these measures.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what steps are being taken to ensure safe social distancing in factories, such as Moy Park, which continue to operate.

(AQW 3869/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Companies are using a broad range of controls to observe social distancing:

- 1 Furloughing non-essential staff and vulnerable groups.
- 2 Allowing working from home (where possible for office workers).
- 3 Closing or shutting down non-essential processes.
- 4 Slowing production lines.
- 5 Amending shift patterns and rotas.
- 6 Removing staff from certain areas.
- 7 Filtering staff into production areas.
- 8 Marking floor production areas to provide a visual representation of the 2 metre boundaries between adjacent staff.
- 9 Where 2 metre boundaries are not possible, introducing physical barriers, such as acrylic screens.
10. Additional supervision or marshals are being implemented on factory floors (and across all areas of sites including entrances, canteens, changing rooms etc.) to monitor compliance.
11. Disciplining staff who do not adhere to the new rules.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what powers exist to compel the closure of factories.

(AQW 3878/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 (the 1978 Order) contains no powers to compel the closure of factories. The power to serve a prohibition notice under section 24 of the 1978 Order is a power, the focus of which is, to prohibit an activity (process) within a factory.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how is social distancing being obtained on factory shop floors and production lines.

(AQW 3879/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Companies are using a broad range of controls to observe social distancing based on PHE COVID 19 guidance:

12. Furloughing non-essential staff and vulnerable groups.
13. Allowing working from home (where possible for office workers).
14. Closing or shutting down non-essential processes.
15. Slowing production lines.
16. Amending shift patterns and rotas.
17. Removing staff from certain areas.
18. Filtering staff into production areas.
19. Marking floor production areas to provide a visual representation of the 2 metre boundaries between adjacent staff.
20. Where 2 metre boundaries are not possible, introducing physical barriers, such as acrylic screens.
21. Additional supervision or marshals are being implemented on factory floors (and across all areas of sites including entrances, canteens, changing rooms etc.) to monitor compliance.
22. Disciplining staff who do not adhere to the new rules.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) what steps she has taken to ensure factories are actually operating safe social distancing; (ii) what specific steps are being taken to ensure adequate social distancing on production lines in food processing companies; (iii) whether protective masks will be provided to such workers; and (iv) whether non-compliant factories be closed.

(AQW 3889/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (1) Our inspectorate staff are contacting businesses in response to raised concerns to ensure that measures are put in place to maintain social distancing and minimise the risks associated with COVID-19 in line with PHA / PHE guidelines. We are requiring business to provide evidence, both written and photographic of the measures taken.

(2) In addition to (1) above HSENI are working with trade representative bodies and DAERA to identify options for social distancing and risk reduction and ensure appropriate measures are implemented across the sector.

(3) Current PHA / PHE guidelines do not recommend the use of masks in non-clinical settings.

The Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 (the 1978 Order) contain no powers to compel the closure of factories. The power to serve a prohibition notice under section 24 of the 1978 Order is a power, the focus of which is, to prohibit an activity (process) within a factory. Where an employer fails to implement the PHE guidelines relating to particular processes HSENI could prohibit that activity until such time as appropriate controls were put in place. Small Business Grant:

(4) Industrial Rating

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what steps will be taken to help companies ineligible for the Small Business Grant because they are subject to industrial rating, rather than the Small Business Rates Relief Scheme.

(AQW 3903/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am pleased to advise the Small Business Support Grant Scheme has now been extended to include those in receipt of industrial derating, subject to eligibility criteria. This extension will provide support to approximately 2,500 additional businesses.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy whether people employed by churches qualify for support under the Job Retention Scheme.

(AQW 3904/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Job retention Scheme is a UK wide Government initiative run administered by HM Revenue and Customs.

Information on the scheme is available at the following:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-costs-through-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

You may also wish to note that further information in related to COVID 19 assistance is available s follows:

For any business related queries in relation to COVID 19 www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk, and

For any individual citizen queries www.nidirect.gov.uk

For information regarding essential businesses

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/oronavirus-covid-19-essential-businesses-and-services>

Please check back regularly as these websites are continuously updated.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to outline when and how small manufacturing businesses under the industrial rates regime will be eligible for the Small Business Support Grant, or like provision.

(AQW 3905/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Please refer to the answer provided for AQW 3903/17-22 for this information.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy, following the recommencement of production at Bombardier's Airport Road site, for her assessment of whether appropriate safety and social distancing measures have been put in place.

(AQW 3940/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that HSENI has been provided with comprehensive information related to the actions Bombardier is taking to comply with COVID-19 public health requirements during phased reopening.

Having reviewed these, HSENI is satisfied that the actions are reasonable in light of current requirements. Should employees returning to work still have concerns, they can contact HSENI for follow-up. To date, HSENI has not received any complaints since the site reopening.

I understand that Bombardier has also been in consultation with unions at the site prior to reopening.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 8 May 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what was the cost of the February 2020 NICS study visit to Brussels; and (ii) whether it is intended to maintain this expenditure after leaving the EU.
(AQW 3171/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The estimated cost of the 2020 Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Study Visit to Brussels is £25,430 to date. We estimate that related costs will bring the total to £28,650. NICS officials will continue to be engaged with EU related matters during the period of transition and negotiations with the EU and with protocol related issues moving forward.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any plans to introduce multi-annual Communities in Transition funding.
(AQW 3401/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Communities in Transition Project is one of 38 actions within the wider Executive Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime and, as such, decisions on funding across the wider Programme are taken by the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme Board, chaired by the Head of the Civil Service.

To date, contracts awarded through the procurement approach undertaken in respect of the Communities in Transition Project are multi annual. This is based on delivery through until March 2021, in line with the wider Programme, with the potential to further extend should additional funding become available.

Ending the harm caused by paramilitary groups was a stated commitment in the New Decade New Approach document and will be a priority in a new multi-year Programme for Government, underpinned by a multi-year budget.

While no decision has yet been taken on funding after March 2021, officials are working with colleagues across the Executive and with delivery partners to ensure that the learning generated through implementing the existing commitments is built into delivery going forward.

More generally, the New Decade New Approach document includes a commitment for the Executive to put in place multi-year budgets (of a minimum of 3 years) from 2021/22 onwards.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether there is anyone other than Ministers, civil servants and special advisers with access to, and use of, office facilities and administrative services in Stormont Castle.
(AQW 3932/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Other than Ministers, civil servants and special advisers, the only other individual with access to, and use of, office facilities and administrative services in Stormont Castle is the Attorney General for Northern Ireland who has an office which he uses periodically.

Department of Education

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education when his Department is likely to announce the next round of capital projects for schools.
(AQW 3977/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): You will be aware that on 5 May 2020 I announced a further 16 school projects that will progress under the second call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2). These schools will receive substantial capital investment of up to £4m for works including extensions or significant refurbishment projects.

I also expect to be in a position to make an announcement in regard to Major Capital Works in schools within the coming months.

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance why the Hardship Scheme for substitute teachers has not been approved; and when approval can be expected.

(AQW 3946/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): There are various ways in which a Hardship Fund for substitute teachers could be approved.

One option is for the Department of Education to continue to pay substitute teachers from within its own budget. This could be done without delay.

If the Department is unable or unwilling to provide funding from within its own budget then another option is to bid for COVID-19 funding. These allocations are decided by the Executive, which consider bids from all Departments in light of competing priorities and the level of additional funding available.

Another option is to request additional resources from the Treasury. The Finance and Education Ministers have jointly written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury requesting access to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme for substitute teachers here.

If the department does not continue to pay substitute teachers from within its budget the timescale of other routes is uncertain.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 3906/17-22, whether the recently approved Procurement Guidance Note 01/20 – Supplier Relief due to COVID-19 fully reflects the Cabinet Office Information Note PPN 01/20 and Action Note PPN 02/20 relaxing public procurement rules during the COVID-19 emergency.

(AQW 3947/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Cabinet Office published PPN 01/20 to remind Contracting Authorities that the Public Contract Regulations 2015 contain provisions for the procurement of urgent goods, works and service in exceptional circumstances. Knowledge of the provisions contained in these Regulations is well embedded in the Centres of Procurement Expertise and it is not necessary to provide guidance regarding their application.

PGN 01/20, approved by the Executive, reflects all the measures for supplier relief outlined in the Cabinet Office PPN 02/20 with the exception of the measures for contingent workers. I had implemented support arrangements for agency workers within the NICS before the PPN was published.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance when the work with Ulster University Economic Policy Centre on a targeted rate relief scheme will be completed.

(AQW 3954/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Ministerial colleagues and I met Mr Hetherington, Director of the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, today to discuss his draft findings. We have asked for his final report to be provided as soon as possible.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance (i) whether Central Procurement Department has a tendering process underway under EU regulations for personal protection equipment (PPE); (ii) whether the tender documents are to be returned by end September; (iii) whether the tenders then need to be appraised before an order can be placed; and (iv) when the PPE will be delivered under an EU process.

(AQW 3993/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) has not initiated a tendering process for PPE.

In an attempt to streamline supplier offers for PPE, CPD published an Expression of Interest on eTendersNI on 27 March 2020. This was not a formal tendering exercise.

The Expression of Interest was a mechanism to collate all PPE specifications and allow suppliers to answer a number of questions regarding their product descriptions, quantities, price and availability. The end date for the Expression of Interest was 30 September 2020.

The Expression of Interest was responded to by only 13 suppliers. More supplier offers continued to be received through other channels. It was therefore decided to close the Expression of Interest in April 2020.

All supplier offers are now received through the NIDirect COVID-19 landing page (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/coronavirus-covid-19-how-your-business-can-help>).

Department of Health

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that Bangor Minor Injuries Unit and Northfield House in Donaghadee will be returned to full use when the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

(AQW 3949/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): As part of COVID-19 surge planning, non-urgent care was re-prioritised to protect patients and to free up stretched Health and Social Care resources. This inevitably involved a temporary reconfiguration across our system to ensure continuity of provision of essential healthcare services for the duration of this pandemic, whilst also providing COVID-19 patients with the care they require in the most appropriate setting.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has indicated that it intends to return Bangor Minor Injuries Unit and Northfield House to their former uses once the pandemic is over.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether he has approved the business case, and the necessary resource allocations, to enable the Magee Graduate Entry Medical School to open next year; and to outline the reasons for his position.

(AQW 3958/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has developed an Outline Business Case addressing the need for additional medical student places recommended by the Northern Ireland Medical Student Places Review. The Outline Business Case is silent on the location and provider of any additional need, as this is a cross-cutting nature for the Northern Ireland Executive to collectively decide.

This will provide opportunity to ensure that issues such as deliverability, attainment of policy objectives, wider socio-economic considerations, and value for money are addressed comprehensively.

My Department will, in particular, require assurance as to the affordability of the significant, recurrent expenditure associated with any expansion of medical student places.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health to detail any action his Department has taken alongside the Department for the Economy to source, or find alternative materials, to aid local manufacturing of safety management standard and personal protective equipment gowns.

(AQW 3986/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department, in conjunction with the Departments of Finance and Economy and Invest NI, has established a new system whereby companies are alerted to the opportunities to supply Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and encouraged to re-purpose their manufacturing or add new product lines to their existing range. The immediate priority is to support a rapid response to meet the urgent demand for priority items which have been identified as theatre gowns and face masks (Type IIR).

In response to the specific call for gowns, a number of local companies have been identified as having an interest in re-purposing their manufacturing processes to manufacture gowns. The companies involved are currently engaged to assess their capability in respect of the volumes and standards required and to enable the technical assessment of prototypes. Subject to this, formal contracts may be agreed which would enable manufacturing plans to proceed.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures are in place to help businesses who pay water charges and will be affected adversely by the coronavirus outbreak.

(AQW 3834/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Last week I announced that in order to help support businesses through this difficult time NI Water has, with the full support of my Department, decided to defer a planned 1.7% increase in non-domestic water and sewerage charges which were due to be introduced on 1 April 2020. As a result of this decision, the tariffs business customer pay will remain unchanged and will be reviewed in the autumn.

I appreciate that any bill at this time may be a challenge, so I also announced that NI Water has decided to temporarily postpone the issuing of all water and sewerage bills until July. With many businesses now closed, or having significantly curtailed their activities, this will avoid businesses feeling the extra burden and distraction of a water and sewerage bill arriving at this time.

These measures will help many businesses, but some may still struggle financially. NI Water encourages customers who are experiencing problems making payments for water and wastewater services to contact them. Customers will be dealt with in an empathetic way and NI Water will make every effort to agree an appropriate payment arrangement.

Department of Justice

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how many successful prosecutions have there been in Northern Ireland under the Official Secrets Act in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 3936/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): In relation to cases dealt with at courts in Northern Ireland during the period 2010 – 2019, there were no convictions for offences under the Official Secrets Act.

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposal at court only. Results of appeals are not included. 2. The answer includes provisional data for 2019.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice when was the last successful prosecution in Northern Ireland under the Official Secrets Act.

(AQW 3937/17-22)

Mrs Long: The most recent conviction at court for an offence under the Official Secrets Act occurred in 2007.

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposal at court only. Results of appeals are not included. 2. The answer relates to cases dealt with up to the end of 2019.

Department for the Economy

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for the Economy to detail all international trade fairs and exhibitions Invest NI have participated in overseas in the last twelve months.

(AQW 2795/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): In the last twelve months, Invest NI has participated in a total of 115 overseas events – please see list attached in Annex A. These international events are to showcase Northern Ireland companies overseas and to promote Northern Ireland as a location of choice to potential investors and are typically aligned to sectors and markets of strategic significance to the economy of Northern Ireland.

Annex A:

The list of overseas Trade Fairs and exhibitions that Invest NI have participated in during the last twelve months from 1 February 2019 to 31 January 2020 is as follows:

No.	Month	Name of Event / Expo / Trade Fairs	Location
1	Feb-19	HR Directors Summit	Birmingham
2	Feb-19	A Celtic Taste	Brussels
3	Feb-19	Gulfood 2019	Dubai
4	Feb-19	GESS 2019 (Education)	Dubai
5	Feb-19	Future of Finance & CFO Summit	London
6	Feb-19	NASSCOM	Mumbai
7	Feb-19	Consero Legal Operations Forum	San Francisco
8	Mar-19	AgriteQ (Agriculture)	Doha
9	Mar-19	Cloud & Cyber Security Expo 2019	London
10	Mar-19	RSA (Cybersecurity)	San Francisco
11	Mar-19	South By South West	Austin
12	Mar-19	Aero Engine Forum	Birmingham
13	Apr-19	Trade Mission to Chile	Chile
14	Apr-19	Project Qatar	Doha
15	Apr-19	GISEC (Cybersecurity)	Dubai
16	Apr-19	DIT AI Trade Mission	Dubai

No.	Month	Name of Event / Expo / Trade Fairs	Location
17	Apr-19	Arabian Travel Market	Dubai
18	Apr-19	Dublin Tech Summit	Dublin
19	Apr-19	Banking Tech - AI- Financial Services	London
20	Apr-19	Agrofood	Muscat
21	Apr-19	Trade Tech	Paris
22	Apr-19	Trade Mission to Portugal	Portugal
23	Apr-19	ICEHE (Education)	Riyadh
24	Apr-19	IE Expo (Environmental)	Shanghai
25	Apr-19	Aircraft Interiors Expo	Hamburg
26	Apr-19	Bauma Germany (Construction)	Munich
27	May-19	UK UAE AI Research Forum	Dubai
28	May-19	Dublin Aviation Summit	Dublin
29	May-19	HOFEX (Food & Hospitality)	Hong Kong
30	May-19	19th Annual SSOW (Shared Services)	Lisbon
31	May-19	NI RegTech Mission	Luxembourg
32	May-19	QUB VC visit to India	New Delhi
33	May-19	Malta AI & Blockchain Summit 2019	St Julian, Malta
34	May-19	China Medical Equipment Fair	Shanghai
35	May-19	ChinaBio	Shanghai
36	May-19	ARVR Innovate	Dublin
37	May-19	The Aviation Summit	Dublin
38	May-19	All Energy Exhibition and Conference 2019	Glasgow
39	May-19	Regtech Luxembourg (Financial Technology)	Luxembourg
40	May-19	Trade Mission to the Nordics	Stockholm and Helsinki
41	Jun-19	Banking Tech - AI- Financial Services	Amsterdam
42	Jun-19	Digital Construction Live	Belfast
43	Jun-19	Fund Forum Copenhagen	Copenhagen
44	Jun-19	Customer Contact Week	Las Vegas
45	Jun-19	InfoSec Europe 2019/2020	London
46	Jun-19	Money 20/20 Europe	Amsterdam
47	Jun-19	Bio International Convention	Philadelphia
48	Jun-19	Paris Air Show	Paris
49	Jul-19	China C&D Waste Forum	Beijing
50	Jul-19	China Aggregate Association Conference	Beijing
51	Jul-19	Financial Innovations & Payments and Cyber-Security Summit	Newport
52	Aug-19	Customer Contact Executive Exchange	Chicago
53	Aug-19	AGC Cyber-Security Disruption Conference	Las Vegas
54	Sep-19	Shared Services and Outsourcing Week	Arizona
55	Sep-19	China International Meat Industry Exhibition 2019	Chengdu
56	Sep-19	Deloitte Shared Services Conference	Dublin

No.	Month	Name of Event / Expo / Trade Fairs	Location
57	Sep-19	British Irish Chamber Annual Gala Dinner	Dublin
58	Sep-19	British Ambassador's Annual Summer Event	Dublin
59	Sep-19	5th Guangzhou International Aggregates, Quarry Tiling & Construction Waste Disposal Exhibition	Guangzhou
60	Sep-19	SIBOS	London
61	Sep-19	Billington Cyber-Security Summit	Washington D.C
62	Sep-19	Canada's Outdoor Farm Show	Canada
63	Sep-19	Defence and Security Equipment International	London
64	Sep-19	Aggregates Guangzhou 2019	Guangzhou
65	Sep-19	Sibos (Financial Services)	London
66	Sep-19	HIDA Streamlining Healthcare Expo & Business Exchange	Chicago
67	Oct-19	Najah Education Expo	Abu Dhabi
68	Oct-19	Abu Dhabi Smart City Summit	Abu Dhabi
69	Oct-19	IOTSWC (Internet of Things)	Barcelona
70	Oct-19	China Education Expo	Beijing
71	Oct-19	Data Leader's Summit	Berlin
72	Oct-19	Qitcom (Smart Cities)	Doha
73	Oct-19	Private Label & Licensing Middle East	Dubai
74	Oct-19	Gulfood Manufacturing	Dubai
75	Oct-19	ITechLaw 2019 European Conference	Dublin
76	Oct-19	UKEAS International Education Exhibition	Lagos
77	Oct-19	Money 20/20	Las Vegas
78	Oct-19	IP Expo Europe- Digital Transformation	London
79	Oct-19	Edutrac (Education)	Muscat
80	Oct-19	RAISE Conference (Education)	Shenzhen
81	Oct-19	Australasian Waste & Recycling Expo	Sydney
82	Oct-19	ConExpo Latin America	Chile
83	Oct-19	Anuga (Food)	Cologne
84	Oct-19	Digital Transformation EXPO Europe 2019	London
85	Oct-19	UKEAS Fair (Education)	Nigeria
86	Oct-19	Trade Mission to Central Eastern Europe	Poland & Czech Republic
87	Oct-19	China Education Expo	Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shanghai
88	Oct-19	Cyber Roadshow	Boston, New York, Washington, Baltimore
89	Oct-19	AWRE (Australasian Waste and Recycling Expo)	Sydney
90	Oct-19	Najah Education Expo	UAE
91	Nov-19	AGC East Coast Technology Conference	Boston
92	Nov-19	Digital Finance Summit	Brussels
93	Nov-19	MENA Mining Show	Dubai
94	Nov-19	Big5 (Construction)	Dubai
95	Nov-19	Sales & Marketing Conference	Dubai

No.	Month	Name of Event / Expo / Trade Fairs	Location
96	Nov-19	Irish Association of Corporate Treasurers (IACT) Conference	Dublin
97	Nov-19	Trade Mission to Nigeria, South Africa	Lagos, Johannesburg
98	Nov-19	Web Summit/ Money Conference	Lisbon
99	Nov-19	Digital Health World Congress	London
100	Nov-19	Construction and Design Platform Event	London
101	Nov-19	CX and EX Transformation Nordics	Stockholm
102	Nov-19	AquaTech	Amsterdam
103	Nov-19	MENA Mining Show	Dubai
104	Nov-19	Medica, World Forum Medicine	Dusseldorf
105	Nov-19	Trade Mission to South Africa, Nigeria	South Africa, Nigeria
106	Dec-19	Fintech Connect	London
107	Dec-19	Trade Mission to Spain	Madrid & Barcelona
108	Dec-19	FinTech Connect 2019	London
109	Jan-20	Arab Health	Dubai
110	Jan-20	Intersec	Dubai
111	Jan-20	Customer Contact Week	Nashville
112	Jan-20	CLOC 2020 London (legal)	London
113	Jan-20	BETT 2020 (Education Technology)	London
114	Jan-20	Arab Health	Dubai
115	May 2019 to January 2020	Channel Islands Quarterly Event Series	Jersey & Guernsey

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 1300/17-22, to detail (i) the number of jobs created by constituency, in each of the last three years, as a result of Foreign Direct Investment visits; (ii) the total grants awarded to companies by Invest NI, in each constituency, in each of the last three years; and (c) the total monies loaned to companies by Invest NI, by constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2901/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) While it isn't possible to establish a direct relationship between an individual company visit and a specific employment-related inward-investment project, I can advise that Invest NI's latest KPI figures show that around 50% of FDI jobs have been created outside Belfast.

Linking a final investment decision to one single visit is not possible a company may visit on a number of different occasions, and to a number of different locations within Northern Ireland before making a decision whether to invest and where to locate.

- (ii) The total grants offered to companies by Invest NI in each constituency in each of the last three years are outlined in the table below.

Table 1 Invest NI Assistance Offered to Businesses by Constituency (2016-17 to 2018-19)

PCA	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Belfast East	9.88	7.52	19.31
Belfast North	3.83	4.80	4.18
Belfast South	22.12	26.92	26.23
Belfast West	2.71	5.56	2.29
East Antrim	3.09	1.04	2.08

PCA	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
East Londonderry	2.09	3.01	2.64
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	4.19	7.91	3.45
Foyle	4.54	3.88	20.19
Lagan Valley	4.97	6.52	9.25
Mid Ulster	7.97	6.02	6.09
Newry & Armagh	4.73	3.14	9.30
North Antrim	9.71	3.19	3.00
North Down	1.37	2.54	2.04
South Antrim	26.03	6.08	5.10
South Down	3.04	3.10	4.12
Strangford	2.88	2.63	1.81
Upper Bann	7.64	7.26	4.96
West Tyrone	9.46	2.84	2.48
Not Determined	0.23	1.70	0.56
Total	130.50	105.64	129.09

Note: In addition to support offered directly to businesses, £35.6m was offered to External Delivery Organisations or universities towards projects or initiatives that will benefit businesses across the whole of Northern Ireland.

- (iii) Invest NI provides a range of loans and loan funds to support business growth and development, the majority of which are primarily under the agency's Access to Finance strategy. Access to Finance has six funds in total, aiming to provide c£185m of finance across the life of the funds to Northern Ireland's SMEs. The funds are either debt or equity focused and are designed to support businesses of different sizes, or at different stages of growth or development.

The table below outlines the total monies loaned to businesses by Invest NI in each of the last three years broken down by Parliamentary Constituency Area.

Table 2 Invest NI Loans Offered to Businesses by Constituency (2016-17 to 2018-19)

PCA	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	Total
Belfast East	1,393,337	535,342	275,000	2,203,679
Belfast North	519,468	461,228	629,382	1,610,078
Belfast South	1,369,287	1,080,392	704,550	3,154,229
Belfast West	581,827	1,782,500	140,000	2,504,327
East Antrim	60,913	104,416	44,341	209,670
East Londonderry	301,099	218,784	68,380	588,263
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	814,202	565,280	165,018	1,544,500
Foyle	879,152	439,949	1,251,455	2,570,557
Lagan Valley	812,947	1,285,440	318,000	2,416,387
Mid Ulster	1,197,587	739,891	151,060	2,088,537
Newry And Armagh	1,114,675	617,510	302,512	2,034,697
North Antrim	319,829	426,961	600,000	1,346,790
North Down	70,086	60,716	623,500	754,302
South Antrim	279,200	913,740	75,000	1,267,940
South Down	446,117	640,256	709,282	1,795,655
Strangford	94,242	198,832	63,756	356,829
Upper Bann	740,853	1,314,522	245,727	2,301,102

PCA	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	Total
West Tyrone	393,057	229,859	173,000	795,916
Not Determined	84,514	0	0	84,514
Total	11,472,393	11,615,617	6,539,963	29,627,972

Note: In addition to loans offered directly to businesses outlined in the table, c£214k of loans were offered to non-business bodies, like External Delivery Organisations or universities, towards projects or initiatives that will benefit businesses across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how many zero-hours contract jobs Invest NI has assisted since 2014.

(AQW 2972/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI assists businesses to create jobs by providing support via Selective Financial Assistance (SFA). The majority of SFA is delivered through employment grant and any individuals employed directly by businesses that are on zero hours contracts will not meet the grant qualifying criteria. Under SFA, full-time employment is defined as 30 or more hours per week or a combination of two persons who are each employed for 15 or more hours per week.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy what meetings or discussions she has had with officials from the System Operator for Northern Ireland, Eirgrid and the Utility Regulator, and what was on the agenda.

(AQW 3006/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since taking up post, I have not met with or held discussions with officials from the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI), or Eirgrid. I do, however, plan to continue to liaise with the Chief Executive of the Utility Regulator in respect of the implications for the energy sector of the current health emergency.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what contact there has been between the Department, the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI), Eirgrid and the Utility Regulator since the deadline for formal information request set out by Utility Regulator; (ii) if there has been meetings with any of these parties, whether minutes were taken; and (iii) if so, whether she will deposit these minutes in the Assembly Library, or otherwise publish.

(AQW 3095/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

(i) Since the deadline for the formal information request on 26 February 2020, the Department has had no engagement with SONI, Eirgrid or UR on governance related matters.

UR has had no engagement with SONI on governance related matters since 26 February 2020.

(ii) Following on from the response provided at (i) there are no meeting records available.

(iii) Following on from the response provided at (i) there are no meeting records available for publication.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to provide (i) a detailed breakdown on the potential of geothermal energy, including locations where it is most abundant and details of any quantifiable measurement of this energy potential; and (ii) for her assessment of the future role of geothermal energy in the transition to a net zero carbon society.

(AQW 3303/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

i) Northern Ireland has substantial, but largely untapped, geothermal potential. It can be classified as shallow or deep.

Shallow geothermal energy can be tapped in many locations throughout Northern Ireland, using vertical or horizontal closed loop ground source heat pumps (GSHPs). Shallow aquifers, particularly the Sherwood Sandstone in the Greater Belfast, Lagan Valley and Newtownards areas, are suitable for providing heating and cooling using boreholes and GSHPs. Shallow GSHP systems can be used for heating and cooling of individual dwellings or, using an array of GSHPs, for larger buildings or small-scale heat networks.

Deep geothermal energy resources can be used to provide the heating input into larger heat networks but are more limited in their distribution in Northern Ireland. Location and estimates of the deep geothermal energy resources in Northern Ireland have been calculated from available data (Reports by CSA, 2005 & 2008, in the Assembly Library).

ii) The role of geothermal energy in the transition to net-zero carbon will be considered in the future Energy Strategy. The current Call for Evidence specifically requests evidence on the opportunities for geothermal heat supply.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how her Department is encouraging further cruise ship visits to Belfast in 2020.

(AQW 3411/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department's arm's length body, Tourism Northern Ireland (TNI), along with Tourism Ireland promote the destination on the Island of Ireland and internationally, including to potential cruise visitors.

The marketing of Belfast and Northern Ireland as a cruise destination is undertaken by Cruise Ireland. Locally its partners include Visit Belfast and Belfast Harbour. TNI has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Visit Belfast.

The lead in time for securing cruise business is generally 12-18 months ahead of the season in question. The sales activity to secure business for the 2020 season, undertaken by Visit Belfast and Belfast Harbour, would therefore have commenced in 2018.

Prior to the Covid 19 crisis impacting on global travel, 129 cruise ships were expected in Belfast between March and October. These cruise calls would have brought an estimated 306,000 cruise visitors (passengers and crew) to Northern Ireland. As of the week commencing 27th April, 54 cruise cancellations have been received, affecting scheduled calls from the start of the season in mid-March through to July. Up to 97,310 passengers and 41,871 crew were expected to have been aboard these ships.

In response to the current situation Belfast Harbour and Visit Belfast are monitoring the on-going situation closely and are in regular contact with cruise operators, shipping agents and shore excursion companies. A co-ordinated industry approach is being sought to enable cruise ships to return to Belfast and British Isles cruise itineraries at a time when it is safe and right to do so. This will involve a multi-agency and multi-sector approach that will include on-going liaison with public health agencies and port authorities, in line with government guidance, in order to safeguard both the local Northern Ireland population and cruise visitors.

For the reasons outlined above further cruise visits to Belfast are not possible in 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQO 304/17-22, how can Greenview Gas as a processor of personal data do so lawfully if, as appears, it is not registered on the Data Protection Register.

(AQW 3467/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As the question states, Greenview Gas Ltd processes, rather than controls, data and is not, therefore, required to register with the Information Commissioner.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy what steps her Department is taking to advise consumers regarding ongoing recalls by Whirlpool of washing machines and tumble dryers.

(AQW 3480/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not have direct responsibility for Product Safety as it is a reserved matter, on which the Office for Product Safety & Standards (OPSS) liaises directly with Environmental Health Services in local Councils.

The Trading Standards Service's Consumerline, based in my Department, however, provides civil law advice to consumers regarding exercising their statutory rights in relation to faulty products. In circumstances where a potential product safety issue is identified by Consumerline staff, the consumer is referred to their local Council's environmental health service as the appropriate body to deal with product safety issues.

Consumerline can give general advice on consumer rights relating to the sale of goods that are not of satisfactory quality or fit for purpose:

- The Consumer Rights Act 2015 states that products must be of satisfactory quality and fit for purpose, which includes that they be safe and durable. If a washing machine or dryer doesn't meet these standards, consumers have a right to redress with the retailer that it was bought from.
- If the manufacturer repair programme is taking an unreasonable amount of time and causing significant inconvenience, consumers can reject the washing machine or dryer and ask for a repair or replacement from the retailer who sold it. If the retailer is unable to repair or replace it, the consumer can also ask for a refund.
- Consumers can also claim for any out-of-pocket expenses incurred as a result of not being able to use the washing machine or tumble dryer, from the retailer who sold it, as long as those expenses are reasonable and foreseeable.
- Where a washing machine or tumble dryer is more than six months old, consumers may be only be entitled to a partial refund, and there may be a deduction to cover wear and tear. A partial refund may not cover the cost of a new washing machine or new dryer.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for the Economy what measures her Department has in place to curb the negative impact coronavirus will have on the freight industry, such as a temporary relaxation of drivers hours rules to ensure supply chains are not negatively impacted.

(AQW 3565/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I understand the issues faced across the various sectors in our economy during the ongoing pandemic including the Freight Industry. In Northern Ireland we are not alone in raising such concerns and there are obviously many supply routes that are strategically important to the UK as a whole. The Executive has formally escalated this issue directly into

the new national decision making structures, established by the Prime Minister, to coordinate, prioritise and respond to the coronavirus pandemic. Additionally, I have personally lobbied UK government Ministers on the need to support this sector.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to list the careers fairs held outside Northern Ireland which were attended by representatives from Queen's University, Belfast and the Ulster University in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3680/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not hold this information, you may wish to contact the universities directly to provide the information requested.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of (i) the role of Dublin Port in GB to NI trade flow; and (ii) how this would be affected in the absence of the Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement, entitled Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3691/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My Department does not hold specific data on the value or quantity of trade flow from Great Britain to Northern Ireland via Dublin Port. However I recognise that this is an important route to market for some sectors of the NI economy, in particular agri-food, due to the shorter journey time between Dublin and Holyhead.

I will continue to prioritise NI trade in goods and services with our most valuable trading partner – Great Britain.

Northern Ireland will however, continue to cooperate with Ireland on areas of mutual economic interest including the facilitation of East-West trade via Dublin Port.

- (ii) I cannot offer an assessment of how NI businesses' use of Dublin port would operate in the absence of the Protocol, as this would depend on the overall UK/EU trading relationship which has not yet been negotiated.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will examine the potential to introduce price gouging in Northern Ireland in order to prohibit price hikes by those cynically seeking to benefit from emergency crises, including in the area of public health.

(AQW 3750/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I fully agree that price hikes of this nature are completely unacceptable in the current situation, when it is important for all in our society to pull together.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has issued a statement regarding the action it is taking in this area. It advises that the CMA wants to ensure that traders do not exploit the current situation to take advantage of people.

The CMA will consider any evidence that companies may have broken competition or consumer protection law, for example by charging excessive

prices or making misleading claims about the efficacy of protective equipment. And it will take direct enforcement action in appropriate cases.

My Department's Trading Standards Service (TSS) will continue to work with the CMA, and TSS can also take enforcement action when it sees instances of misleading claims. I would therefore encourage members to draw to my attention any specific instances where this is happening.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement she has had with childcare and childminding small and medium-sized enterprises to support them to survive and respond to COVID-19.

(AQW 3807/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have had no specific engagement with the childcare sector, but have had extensive engagement with organisations representing the wider business community regarding the challenges that they face.

Childcare businesses, like any other business may be eligible to apply for some of the schemes put in place to help during this crisis.

The department has responded to around 10 queries from the specific businesses in the childcare sector in respect of access to grants and support.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 2757/17-22, to explain how the dairy industry can effectively regulate itself in respect of the reliability of milk tanker meter measuring instruments if such instruments are not prescribed equipment requiring testing by Trading Standards.

(AQW 3819/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The National Measurement and Regulation Office (NMRO) project, (referred to in the response to AQW 2757/17-22), which considered the milk measurement process, concluded that there is a need for establishing and demonstrating

increased objectivity across the whole measurement process, in order to raise confidence levels for the benefit of all involved parties.

Based on the evidence generated by the project, it was recommended that prescription of tankers for milk collection was not necessary. However, the report suggested that better confidence in the measurement chain could be achieved by various other ways including:-

- Effective, obvious sealing of tanker components that could have an effect on accuracy of measurement
- Obvious Calibration Stickers on the metering system
- Trading Standards Officer witnessed calibrations of meters
- Trading Standards Officers calibrating farm tanks – but this would need a specialist ‘food compatible’ form of measurement system for conducting the testing, and scrupulous hygiene procedures would need to be followed
- A Code of Practice for the calibration of tanker metering systems

Consequently, the NMRO entered into discussions with the UK Dairy Transport Assurance Scheme (DTAS) (which includes NI members) with the objective of raising confidence levels in the measuring systems. Following discussions with NMRO, the DTAS Management Committee produced a Code of Practice which provides the framework for objective metrological standards and tolerances. The Code is adopted across the industry.

TSS is aware that some tanker meters are either calibrated or systematically replaced on an annual basis. In some instances, they are sealed with calibrators' seals. These seals are not legally required, since the equipment is not prescribed by regulations, but they bring demonstrable security where they are in use. Some calibrations have been audited by Trading Standards Officers and these calibrations were conducted using traceable proving tanks, which had themselves been calibrated by the Trading Standards Service.

If there is a lack of confidence in the objectivity of the measurement process, in terms of accuracy, security and traceability of measurement or concerns are expressed about the difference between the quantity recorded by the tanker meter, when compared with what the farmer thought was in the tank, then I would ask that you report the matter to my Department's Trading Standards Service. TSS would be happy to receive evidence or complaints about metrological issues within this sector. The Trading Standards Service has no records on its database of any complaints being made by farmers or anyone within the milk industry about the accuracy of measuring equipment being used in these transactions.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy when will AQW 3821/17-22 be answered.
(AQW 3991/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: AQW 3821/17-22 was answered on 30 April 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy why, in response to the plight of genuine Renewable Heat Incentive claimants, she is not moving to a tariff comparable with that prevailing elsewhere in the United Kingdom.
(AQW 4016/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are fundamental differences between the RHI scheme in GB and the Northern Ireland scheme with regards to initial design, subsequent reviews/changes and cost elements for tariff calculations. While both schemes target a 12% rate of return for typical installations, differences between the schemes include significantly different capital costs, fuel prices, greater access to natural gas in GB and the frequency of reviews of and amendments to the GB scheme. The tariffs for the Northern Ireland RHI would not therefore be expected to parallel those on the GB scheme.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 15 May 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister in regard to the commitment in their Written Ministerial Statement on the Executive's legislative programme that "all these legislative proposals will be subject to the established procedures for Executive referral and consideration before their introduction", whether that includes a public consultation exercise in respect of each proposal.

(AQW 2212/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The stage in the legislative process at which the Executive agrees that a Bill, as drafted, should be introduced in the Assembly does not involve public consultation.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the oversight; and (ii) accountability provisions relevant to the Interim Advocate for Victims/Survivors of Historical Institutional Abuse.

(AQW 3917/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: While the Interim Advocate (IA) is independent, his office operates under the normal accountability arrangements for an arm's length body. A workplan has been agreed and regular oversight meetings are scheduled between TEO officials and the Interim Advocate.

TEO's Accounting Officer is responsible to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and is accountable to the Assembly for the Office of the Interim Advocate's use of resources in carrying out its functions. An official from within the IA's office has been designated as Senior Accountable Officer. The IA's Office participates in regular TEO financial and governance arrangements.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) how many staff are employed within his Department's information service; (ii) of these, how many are classed as press officers; and (iii) the annual cost of this service.

(AQW 3466/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Media Services Branch within DAERA employs 12.06 FTE staff, of which 4.8 FTE are classed as press officers.

The salaried costs for all staff within Media Services for the most recent complete financial year (2018/19) is £481,397.73

Services provided by DAERA's Media Services Branch include;

- Promoting the work of the Department
- Providing advice to departmental staff
- Liaising with and responding to media organisations
- Graphic design
- Internal communications
- Administrative support

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what financial support he plans to put in place for those involved in eel fishing on Lough Neagh, who, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, will face financial hardship.

(AQW 3953/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware the demand for fish across all the fishing sectors has been significantly reduced and that this also applies to the Lough Neagh fishery.

My Department has considered what additional measures can be put in place, other than those already outlined by the Government. The fixed costs for these fishermen are very low compared to sea fishermen and many are unlikely to reach the required income threshold, therefore no additional help can be provided in respect of these.

My Department has increased the European Maritime Fisheries Funding (EMFF) grant for glass eel stocking into Lough Neagh, from 50% to 60%. I will continue to work with LNFCS to keep the situation under review.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he can use emergency measures to increase fines for litter and fly-tipping.

(AQW 3995/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am not minded at this stage to take measures which would increase fines for littering and fly-tipping.

It is unfortunate that a small minority of people disregard the laws around littering and fly-tipping and fail to recognise the environmental damage that can be caused by such actions. I believe that the current fixed penalty amounts, which can be issued to offenders in respect of such actions, are set at an appropriate level. When pursued through the courts, significant fines can be imposed on persons convicted of offences relating to littering and fly-tipping but, of course, the level of fines in specific cases is a matter for the judiciary.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what his Department can do to address the increase in fly-tipping in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area.

(AQW 4003/17-22)

Mr Poots: There have been reports of an increase in fly-tipping across council areas during the Covid 19 period and addressing this issue is a priority for my Department, which is working closely with all councils. As part of that work, and to assist in identifying problem areas, all councils are providing a daily assessment of the level of any increase in fly-tipping and their capability to deal with it.

Currently, Ards and North Down Borough Council are reporting a small increase in the number of such incidents in their area, but have indicated that the level of increase is not deemed significant and council resources are effectively addressing the issue.

However, should that assessment change and the council seek further assistance, my Department are prepared to offer additional support both in the clean-up of fly-tipped wastes, and where appropriate, in taking enforcement action against those responsible for this illegal activity.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the difficulties caused by the shutdown of the hospitality industry due to COVID-19, whether he will commit to industry-specific financial assistance for dairy farmers.

(AQW 4018/17-22)

Mr Poots: Our dairy farmers, along with others in the agri-food supply chain, have been working extremely hard to maintain an effective and efficient supply of food at this critical time, and I am fully aware of the many challenges they are currently facing.

I and my officials are meeting with industry stakeholders on a regular basis to hear and discuss their concerns. My officials are continuing to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on the dairy sector and are assessing the need for specific financial assistance to support this sector. They are in close and regular contact with Defra as these issues are by no means unique to Northern Ireland and there is a requirement to co-ordinate efforts across the UK.

I am also in regular contact with my Ministerial counterparts across the other Devolved Administrations, and this is particularly important should we need to present a case to HM Treasury for funding. In addition, I will continue to liaise with our Finance Minister on additional Executive funding that may be required in the coming months to help support the agricultural industry at this time.

Dairy farmers, who have been impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, are also able to avail of the support measures that have already been announced by Government. These include the Self Employed Income Support Scheme, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme and the Bounce Back Loan Scheme.

Further details on the COVID 19 support measures for businesses and employers can be found on the NI Business Info website www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk. These details are updated and added to on a regular basis.

Just last week, a £1 million UK wide promotional campaign has also been launched to help increase sales of dairy products by encouraging the public to drink more milk. I am pleased to say that DAERA have contributed to the funding of this campaign along with the Agricultural and Horticultural Development Board (AHDB), Dairy UK, Defra, the Scottish Government, and the Welsh Government.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 3466/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 4050/17-22)

Mr Poots: I can confirm that the response to 3466/17-22 was issued on 30 March 2020.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what risk assessment was undertaken prior to the reopening of forest park facilities to ensure emergency service vehicles could access them in the event of an emergency.
(AQW 4056/17-22)

Mr Poots: Risks associated with emergency services having immediate access to Forest Service forests, including its Parks, are managed through a standing agreement with all three emergency services (PSNI, NIFRS, NIAS). The agreement takes account of the scale and large geographical spread of forests across Northern Ireland. On this basis, and to ensure that emergencies can be attended to without any delay regardless of the proximity of Forest Service personnel or problems with locks and keys being encountered, the emergency services are remitted to cut and remove locks on arrival. This avoids the risk of any confusion and delay in emergency services dealing with situations and the need for site specific arrangements.

The standing agreement has been reviewed, between Forest Service and the emergency services, since the start of the Covid-19 outbreak including with the NIAS Emergency Planning Officer. Emergency services have confirmed that existing operational practice is effective and remains the preferred approach.

Department of Education

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education what investigations his Department has undertaken to establish what options are available to his Department to financially compensate schools and parents who lost money as a result of school trips being cancelled due to the COVID-19 crisis, including those trips which had to be cancelled before the Commonwealth and Foreign Office advised against foreign travel.

(AQW 3952/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Schools should engage with their travel providers and credit card companies to secure refunds for cancelled trips in the first instance. If schools are unable to recoup their full costs, they should contact their insurance providers.

Any school facing financial difficulty should contact the Education Authority, which is the funding authority for all grant-aided schools.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether (i) there will be a contingency fund put in place for schools who have lost money for scheduled school trips due to COVID-19, where their insurance fails to cover these costs; and (ii) he will engage with the NST Travel Group to facilitate refunds or rebookings of school trips cancelled due to COVID-19.

(AQW 3968/17-22)

Mr Weir: In the first instance, schools should engage with their travel providers and credit card companies to secure refunds for cancelled trips. Schools should also review the information on travel insurance implications published by the Association of British Insurers (ABI) following the COVID 19 outbreak.

Any school facing financial difficulty should contact the Education Authority, which is the funding authority for all grant-aided schools.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in providing financial compensation to substitute teachers.

(AQW 4031/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department remains acutely aware of the concerns of the substitute teaching workforce providing day-to-day cover, who no longer have access to secure work as a result of Covid-19.

The Department continues to seek ways to provide funding for a hardship scheme for substitute teachers. Proposals have been developed for a hardship fund, and the Department has written jointly with DoF to HM Treasury, to ask for urgent consideration of whether substitute teachers can be furloughed through the "Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme."

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, since the COVID-19 lockdown, how does the number of deaths, excluding those related to COVID-19, compare with this period in a normal year; and whether the non-deployment of regular hospital care is considered to be a factor.

(AQW 3938/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Weekly published statistics from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) show that between 21st March and 1st May 2020 there have been 1,984 non covid-19 related deaths registered. The average number of deaths for this same period over the previous five years was 1,806.

Officials from the Department of Health are in the process of compiling an impact assessment, which will evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on our health and social care services.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether he has approved the business case, and the necessary resource allocations, to enable the Magee Graduate Entry Medical School to open next year; and to outline the reasons for his position. **(AQW 4002/17-22)**

Mr Murphy: In line with the New Decade New Approach priority, I am committed to the Magee Graduate Entry Medical School. I have written to the Health Minister confirming my agreement that Graduate Entry Medical trainee places are needed and that these additional places should be provided and located at the Ulster University campus at Magee.

As this is a cross-cutting issue the wider Executive will also have to agree the way forward. I have written to Executive colleagues advising that a decision must now be reached as a matter of urgency.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance (i) for an update on Dormant Accounts; (ii) how much money has been identified through the scheme; and (iii) what plans he has to ensure that this money is used effectively by social economy and the community and voluntary sector.

(AQW 4020/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Dormant Accounts Fund now totals £20.5 million. The Fund will be used to support third sector organisations as they emerge from the COVID-19 crisis in line with the themes of resilience, capacity and sustainability as originally identified.

In September 2019, the Department of Finance, directed the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF), to establish a Dormant Accounts Scheme. The NLCF has consulted with Stakeholders to inform a Strategic Plan which will set out how this money is used effectively by social economy and the community and voluntary sector.

Alongside its work as part of the COVID-19 response, the Lottery is continuing to develop its Strategic Plan, which will be laid by my Department in the Assembly in due course, with the Fund open to applications thereafter.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, with regard to use of the Stormont Estate for recreational use, outside the current emergency, (i) what evaluation has been conducted (a) as to the match, or otherwise, between such use and available on-site car parking facilities; (b) as to the extent of on-street parking by users of the estate; (ii) what was the result of any such evaluation; and (iii) what action is planned.

(AQW 4025/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) (a) Stormont Estate management regularly monitors availability of on-site parking for visitors to the estate.
- (b) No evaluation has been conducted as to the extent of on-street parking by users of the estate
- (ii) To manage the availability of on-site parking for visitors to the Stormont Estate the following measures have been introduced:
 - additional overflow parking is available at the NICS Sports Association complex at evenings and weekends;
 - the play park car park has been re-lined with additional parking provision for people with disabilities and the introduction of a one-way system;
 - additional security staff are available over the summer months to assist visitors and manage on-site parking; and
 - parking for groups arriving by bus is accommodated on the main Prince of Wales Avenue.
- (iii) Stormont Estate Management will continue to monitor on-site parking availability for visitors to the estate.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what is the rationale for the limited car parking spaces at the entrances to the Stormont Estate being coned off, with the result of intensifying the inconvenience to local residents from on-street parking.

(AQW 4026/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The parking spaces at the Prince of Wales entrance to the Stormont Estate were coned off by the Stormont Estate Management Unit, in consultation with the police, to discourage people from making non-essential journeys by car to the grounds for exercise. The Department has no responsibility for parking at the other entrances to the Estate.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to detail the 'accounting adjustment' of £3bn to the Northern Ireland fiscal deficit that he claimed in his response to AQO 178/17-22 on 25 February 2020.

(AQW 4027/17-22)

Mr Murphy: ONS produce the Country and Regional Public Sector Finances report and publish this alongside a methodology guide and supplementary tables which set out how the overall accounting adjustment is applied.

This indicates that the accounting adjustment is used to reconcile Total Expenditure on Services (TES) to Total Managed Expenditure (TME), and lists how the individual components of the adjustment are estimated. The largest of these in 2018/19

were: local government consumption of fixed capital (£1.3bn); Central government consumption of fixed capital (£768m); and Current Value Added Tax refunds (£763m).

The full report, methodology guide, and supplementary tables are available at www.ons.gov.uk.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance why the Executive is holding £2.6 million to cover the cost of devolved Air Passenger Duty in 2020-21, given the absence of any long-haul routes from Northern Ireland.

(AQW 4032/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The allocation for Air Passenger Duty (APD) in the Budget is £2.3m and this reflects the block grant reduction applied in 2020/21.

This cost relates to the ongoing duty estimated to have been forgone annually by the Treasury in transferring this rate setting power to the Assembly. The mechanism for applying that reduction to our budget was set at the time devolution was agreed in 2012 and has been applied every year since then. It is based on the duty raised at that time, not the duty that would be payable on current flights.

This budget reduction is required under state aid rules which dictate that the Assembly must bear the financial consequences of devolving any tax, and the risk that revenue, and the activity that generates that can either rise, or fall, as has been the case with direct long haul flights.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, in reference to paragraph 2.11 of the Budget document 2020-21 and the indication that the Block Grant provides 85 per cent of Northern Ireland's funding sources, whether this is comprised of both DEL and AME expenditure.

(AQW 4076/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Paragraph 2.11 of the Budget document outlines a number of funding sources that contribute to the Executive's Budget. The NI Block Grant referenced in paragraph 2.11 is Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) expenditure as defined in Chapter 2, paragraph 2.1 of the 2015 Statement of Funding Policy:

"Funding from the UK government to the devolved administrations falls into two broad categories: block grant (or DEL) funding and funding in relation to Annually Managed Expenditure (AME)."

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance what communication his Department has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to resolve the online Identification verification problems with the Self Employed Income Support Scheme for holders of an Irish passport and a Northern Ireland Driver Licence.

(AQW 4092/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Permanent Secretary has raised this matter directly with the Chief Executive of HMRC who confirmed that:

- 1 People from here will not be excluded from the scheme.
- 2 Citizens from here can still use credit reference information online to verify their identity if they have not already established their credentials with HMRC or possess the other documents that can be used.
- 3 A helpline also exists for those having problems and applications can be made by telephone.
- 4 HMRC are working for a speedy solution.

My Department will continue to work with HMRC until the issue is resolved.

Department of Health

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he will issue guidance to Health Service staff informing them that the Home Office is not to be notified of migrants who seek medical assistance for COVID-19.

(AQW 3899/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The Health and Personal Social Services Provision of Health Services to Persons Not Ordinarily Resident Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 make certain health services available to visitors in Northern Ireland at a charge. Visitors are those who are not ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland.

The Regulations also provide that some services and categories of visitor are always exempt from charge.

Since 7th March 2020 treatment for Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has been exempt from charge to ensure that there is no financial barrier to visitors to Northern Ireland receiving treatment for Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland were informed of this on 6th March 2020.

The categories of visitor which are always exempt from charge include refugees and asylum seekers, including failed asylum seekers, victims, and suspected victims of human trafficking and those individuals who are determined to be exempt from charge on exceptional humanitarian grounds.

The Business Services Organisation compiles personal data of those who have accessed healthcare services in Northern Ireland and have outstanding debts, this information is sent to the Home Office in accordance with the Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules (HC 1511) dated 10th October 2011 and subsequent updates.

As treatment for Covid-19 in Northern Ireland is exempt from charge there will be no debt to be recovered.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health when his Department will publish Northern Ireland specific restriction guidance for people diagnosed with autism who require additional exercise as part of their care routine.

(AQW 3955/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has been working closely with colleagues in the Health and Social Care Board, in relation to implementation of the guidance which can be accessed on the Public Health Agency website at the link below.

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus#looking-after-yourself-and-your-family>

A template letter has been shared by the Health & Social Care Board with each Health & Social Care Trust for in circumstances where a person with autism or a learning disability needs to leave their home, including travel outside of their area, for exercise more than once a day.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what support is available to severely ill patients who are presently unable to receive ongoing specialist treatment from services in Great Britain due to travel restrictions.

(AQW 3956/17-22)

Mr Swann: The four UK nations and NHS England Specialist Services Team have contingency arrangements in place to ensure that all patients in the UK continue to have access to highly specialist and time sensitive treatments in GB. Under these arrangements, Northern Ireland patients continue to travel supported by the Health and Social Care Board/Trust patient travel teams, who work through the travel logistics and COVID-19 restrictions with the patient.

In circumstance where services in GB have been temporarily suspended due to COVID-19, these patients will have their care managed by local referring consultants and Trusts. Continuation of treatment plans and reviews may involve the use of teleconferencing/videoconferencing with GB treating teams for advice and ongoing management.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health (i) for an update on the mental health strategy and action plan; (ii) when the strategy will be published; and (iii) whether money has been set aside in the budget to fund the strategy and action plan.

(AQW 3960/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Mental Health Action Plan is at a very advanced stage, however its publication has been delayed due to COVID-19.

As with the other New Decade, New Approach priorities, the ability to deliver on these priorities is heavily dependent on budget allocations

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the success of public testing in containing the spread of COVID-19 after the World Health Organisation declared an Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020.

(AQW 3963/17-22)

Mr Swann: Our approach to testing for COVID-19 is based on sound public health principles and evolving epidemiological evidence. The first case of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland was notified on 27 February 2020. As of 11 May 2020, 34,144 individuals have been tested and 4,193 laboratory confirmed cases. Through the national partnership testing initiative, 10,215 samples have been taken (as of 11 May 2020). We continue to rapidly scale up our testing capacity and capability; this will support the further expansion of priority groups for testing. A series of surveillance programmes are also underway to help us better understand how the virus is behaving in hospital and community settings, and to effectively inform any planned change to our pandemic response arrangements.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how his Department has followed the World Health Organisation's call for immediate widespread public testing for COVID-19 from the 16 March 2020 onward.

(AQW 3964/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing for COVID-19 is a critical part of our pandemic response. The Testing Strategy for Northern Ireland, developed by an Expert Advisory Group in March 2020, and supported by an Interim Protocol for Testing, sets out the priority groups for testing for COVID-19. The position on testing is fast moving; as we seek to address the challenges this pandemic presents, our approach to testing is based on sound public health principles and evolving epidemiological evidence. We are working to ensure that testing across Northern Ireland increases daily and priority groups for testing will continue to be further expanded in line with emerging evidence and as we rapidly scale up our testing capability.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health (i) what assessment his Department has made on the impact of COVID-19 on multiple sclerosis (MS) services and the impact on people receiving a diagnosis of MS; and (ii) whether his Department will

work with professionals and charities to ensure people are not delayed from accessing essential treatments for MS in the longer-term.

(AQW 3971/17-22)

Mr Swann: In order to protect patients, as well as health and social care resources, from the impact of COVID-19, non-urgent care has been re-prioritised across the HSC system. This has had a significant impact in all Trusts on the provision of neurology outpatient activity, which provides services to MS patients.

New appointments have been impacted and, although some telephone appointments have been offered where this was clinically appropriate, the HSC Board expects that diagnosis for some patients has been delayed.

Access to disease modifying drug therapies has continued and currently HSC Trusts are considering arrangements for the re-introduction of face-to-face clinics, although the safety of patients and staff remains a key priority. Review appointments have been taking place in all Trusts by telephone. The HSC Board's Regional MS Group, which includes representation from all HSC Trusts and the MS Society, is due to meet again in early June 2020. Outside of the regional group meetings, discussions continue with the clinical teams in each HSC Trust and charitable organisations.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to outline the rationale for stopping contact tracing from the 12 March 2020, contrary to the advice of the World Health Organisation.

(AQW 3975/17-22)

Mr Swann: In line with the rest of the UK, the PHA were conducting rigorous contact tracing for all cases of COVID-19 until the 12th March 2020.

On the 12th March, the UK moved from the containment phase to the delay phase. The focus of our efforts then shifted from individual contact tracing to wider measures, including advising all of the public what to do if they had symptoms, prevention of spread, and social distancing.

The rationale underpinning the change in approach from the containment to the delay phase was based on sound public health principles as it recognised that there was widespread community transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The application of rigorous social distancing measures effectively superseded contact tracing during this 'delay' phase of our pandemic response.

All of the advice and guidance on preventing onward spread, on self-isolation and on social distancing, which previously formed the basis for the rationale underpinning contact tracing, now applies to the general population.

This position has been kept under review, and now plans are being progressed to establish an extensive Northern Ireland wide contact tracing service.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) know the composition and membership of the British Government's Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE); and how the CMO, as an observer on SAGE, has explained our unique situation, given we are on a different island.

(AQW 3976/17-22)

Mr Swann: The membership of SAGE was made public on 4 May and can be found at the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/scientific-advisory-group-for-emergencies-sage-coronavirus-covid-19-response-membership/list-of-participants-of-sage-and-related-sub-groups>

Northern Ireland is represented on SAGE by its Chief Scientific Adviser who is a full member and, as such, can participate fully in discussions. The unique situation of Northern Ireland where relevant is explained in discussions.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health how provision for accessing abortion is being made available under the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020, (i) up to 10 weeks gestation; (ii) between 10 to 24 weeks gestation; and (iii) up to term in cases of disability.

(AQW 3981/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are no commissioned abortion services in Northern Ireland. It is for medical professionals to determine whether an individual woman's clinical circumstances meet the grounds for a termination of pregnancy in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health what assessment the Executive has made of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service decision to supply abortion pills to women in Northern Ireland, within the terms of Regulations 8 and 11 of the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020.

(AQW 3982/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is my Department's assessment that the service provided by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) is not provided for in the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020. My Department has written to BPAS advising them of this, and of their responsibility to ensure that any service they provide is lawful.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health to detail the additional resources his Department has directed to managing COVID-19 in residential and nursing homes in the public and private sector.

(AQW 3985/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health has taken steps to support care homes by providing and deploying the following additional resources:

- £6.5m has been provided in additional funding to care homes.
- HSC Trusts are block booking vacated beds in care homes, to provide financial stability for providers, where numbers of residents drop 20% below average.
- Each care home has a named contact in their local Trust who can assist in relation to staffing or other business continuity issues that arise. Where necessary, HSC Trust staff are available for redeployment to a care home in an urgent situation.
- Supplies of PPE are being provided, free of charge, to homes where supplies cannot be sourced, and each Trust has set up a dedicated point of contact for its care homes in relation to PPE queries. In the week ending 2 May 1.4m items were provided to independent care homes and 0.9 to Domiciliary Care Providers.
- Assistance with sourcing and provision of palliative medicines, enhancement of oxygen supplies and community pharmacy advice services are being provided to care homes.
- Testing is available for:
 - Anyone being discharged to a care home from hospital;
 - Anyone entering a care home from their own home or supported living facility;
 - Care home staff with symptoms or whose household members have symptoms;
 - Any suspected case in a care home – i.e. anyone with symptoms; and
 - All outbreaks (all residents and staff to be tested, with or without symptoms).

Guidance for Care Homes has been updated as a result of COVID-19 and provides key information to providers of residential and nursing care.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-guidance-nursing-and-residential-care-homes-northern-ireland>

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health (i) to outline the powers of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority to inspect abortion providers, specifically on how they conduct abortions; (ii) how these powers differ to the Care Quality Commission in England; and (iii) whether he proposes to put new powers in place.

(AQW 3992/17-22)

Mr Swann:

There are currently no commissioned abortion services in Northern Ireland, though abortion is legal if carried out in accordance with the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020. RQIA's powers, including inspections, are set out in The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 [http:](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2003/431/contents)

(i) [//www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2003/431/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2003/431/contents). They do not have any powers specifically in relation to abortion providers as they are not a discrete category of provider required to register with, and be inspected by, RQIA.

The Care Quality Commission (Registration) Regulations 2009 [http:](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2009/3112/regulation/20/made)

(ii) [//www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2009/3112/regulation/20/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2009/3112/regulation/20/made) set out specific requirements relating to the termination of pregnancies.

(iii) Until such time as I am in a position to commission services, I have made no assessment of the need for additional powers.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that, following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Causeway Coast and Glens Council area will have adequate acute hospital provision.

(AQW 3994/17-22)

Mr Swann: As part of COVID-19 surge planning, non-urgent care was re-prioritised to protect patients and to free up stretched Health and Social Care resources. This inevitably involved a temporary reconfiguration across our system to ensure continuity of provision of essential healthcare services for the duration of this pandemic, whilst also providing COVID-19 patients with the care they require in the most appropriate setting.

I can confirm that measures that have been put in place are temporary and that no long-term decision in relation to changing service provision will be made without a rigorous assessment, taking into account all relevant issues and with any proposed changes being subject to public consultation.

All Trusts are considering how best to maintain services for Covid-19 patients, while also re-engaging other services that had been scaled back as a result of the pandemic.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health what correspondence the Executive has had with the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) about BPAS supply of abortion pills to women in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3999/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department wrote to the British Pregnancy Advisory Service on 4 May 2020, advising that the provision of a telemedicine service was not provided for in the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020, and reminding them that it was their responsibility to ensure that any service they provided is lawful.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) his Department's spend on perinatal mental health in each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years; (ii) how the service is delivered; and (iii) the plans to develop this service.

(AQW 4010/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mental health support for new or expectant mothers in Northern Ireland is provided through general mental health services, in line with the stepped care approach of the Integrated Perinatal Mental Health Care Pathway. Of the five HSC Trusts, only Belfast provides limited specialist perinatal mental health services for the region. My officials are currently considering the detail of a business case for enhanced community perinatal mental health services.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Health when his Department will issue guidance for abortion providers on operating within the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020.

(AQW 4011/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is currently no commissioned abortion service in Northern Ireland. I will consider the need for guidance once a decision in relation to commissioning has been taken by the Executive.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail the average number of people using intensive care unit (ICU) beds in the Ulster Hospital during the period 13 April 2020 to 1 May 2020; (ii) what staff numbers were required to treat people in ICU during this period; (iii) what the Ulster Hospital ICU staff compliment was at this time; (iv) how many staff were transferred from Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals to the Ulster Hospital to work in ICU; (v) whether any services at the Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals were paused as a result of the staff transfers; and (vi) when transferred staff will return to their substantive roles.

(AQW 4024/17-22)

Mr Swann: From information held in my Department, I can confirm that the average number of daily patients present in the Intensive Care Unit of the Ulster Hospital between 13th April and 30th April 2020 was eight patients.

The remainder of these questions would require significant input from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Given the current situation, I feel it would not be appropriate to refer the question to the Trust as it would detract from its focus on delivering front-line services during the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

All Trusts are considering how best to maintain services for Covid-19 patients, while also re-engaging other services that had been scaled back as a result of the pandemic.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to introduce measures to assist independent physiotherapists during the COVID-19 crisis.

(AQW 4033/17-22)

Mr Swann: Independent physiotherapists are privately run businesses and are not Health and Social Care employees and as such the department does not hold policy responsibility for these professionals, neither does the department have a budget for them.

These practitioners are requesting assistance in relation to access to business grants and reduction in business rates during the Covid 19 pandemic.

As these queries relate to business issues rather than professional practice or policy they have previously been referred to Department of Economy to address.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans for supporting dentists and associated staff through the COVID-19 crisis.

(AQW 4034/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has established the COVID-19: General Dental Services (GDS) Financial Support Scheme (FSS) with the aim of providing financial support to General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) in response to the significant reduction in dental activity levels due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The total amount of GDS payments made to NI dentists was higher in April 2020 than the same month last year, in the context of a significant reduction in dental activity.

Full details on the scheme can be accessed at the link below which includes background to the scheme and a list of Frequently Asked Questions.

<http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3131.htm>

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether any enhanced or additional fee is due to medical practitioners who certify cause of death as including COVID-19; and how much is this fee.

(AQW 4079/17-22)

Mr Swann: Medical practitioners have a duty to certify death in accordance with the Births and Deaths Registration (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

This is a statutory requirement and does not attract the payment of any fee, regardless of the cause of death.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many of her departmental public buildings and sites have received a deep clean in relation to COVID-19.

(AQW 3648/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): To date, two of my Departmental public buildings, DVA's Balmoral Road and Newtownards Test Centres, have received deep cleans in preparation of the test centres being used by the Belfast and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts as COVID-19 test centres.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQO 351/17-22, (i) what measures her Department is taking to ensure that all planning decisions and infrastructure projects in Northern Ireland comply with the UK's legally binding climate targets; and (ii) whether she will consider calling in any planning applications from local councils that may have significant climate impacts.

(AQW 4000/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) After COVID-19, tackling the climate emergency is one of the biggest challenges that we face today. As Infrastructure Minister, I have a clear agenda on climate change. There is an urgent need to reduce emissions in order to tackle the climate emergency and reach at least the UK net zero target by 2050.

I want to ensure that in progressing major road schemes, we are taking the necessary steps to minimise additional private car travel and to maximise the use of active travel and public transport. My focus will be on using available resources to green our infrastructure and deliver sustainable transport that connects communities, availing of the opportunities that arise when we collaborate within and beyond government to reduce the length of journeys and hence the need for motorised travel. The Department is working to identify actions to support the decarbonisation of transport and infrastructure services that will help to reduce carbon emissions and ultimately enhance citizens' lives and our communities as well as our economy and environment. I have also recently announced that there will be a walking and cycling Champion within my Department to help ensure that we increase the percentage of journeys made by walking and cycling.

In taking planning decisions I also want to ensure that the overall objective of the planning system in furthering sustainable development is met. Planning decisions are made taking account of the strategic guidance set out in the Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS) and in light of prevailing planning policy as set out in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS). One of the key aims of the RDS is to reduce our carbon footprint and facilitate mitigation and adaptation to climate change whilst improving air quality. Similarly the SPPS indicates that the planning system should help to mitigate and adapt to climate change by shaping new and existing developments in ways that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and by promoting sustainable patterns of development while working with natural environmental processes.

- (ii) Whilst my Department has powers to direct that certain applications be referred to it rather than being dealt with by councils, it is anticipated that these powers would only be used in exceptional circumstances as it is recognised that councils are best placed to deal with the vast majority of applications within their own council areas.

Department for the Economy

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what assessment her Department has made regarding petroleum licence applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16; and (ii) to indicate whether or not she intends to bring the decision on these applications to the Executive.

(AQW 1048/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): In line with the requirements of the Petroleum (Production) Act (Northern Ireland) 1964, my Department has carried out technical and financial assessments of petroleum licence applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.

I can confirm that, due to the controversial nature of petroleum licensing, I intend to bring the decision on whether or not to grant these two licences to the Executive.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of how the UK Government's proposals to change the immigration system from 1 January 2021 will affect the hospitality sector.

(AQW 2472/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A well skilled and competent workforce is critical to Northern Ireland businesses realising their full potential.

I recognise the challenges voiced collectively by the Northern Ireland tourism industry to address the on-going short fall in the hospitality workforce, despite their concerted efforts to recruit and retain staff.

I welcome their strong commitment to industry skills development and to working collaboratively with my officials in Tourism NI and Invest NI to realise our collective ambition to make tourism and hospitality increasingly a career of choice, as we seek to build on tourism's success to become an even greater source of economic growth.

I am conscious of the views of industry in response to the UK Government's recently released policy statement on a UK points based immigration system, specifically that there will not be regional thresholds or different arrangements for different parts of the UK.

I understand that the threshold of £25,600 and the skill level requirements are key issues for the hospitality industry, which is highly dependent upon migrant labour, up to thirty percent of the workforce. In addition, competing with the Republic of Ireland for skills is a further challenge for future recruitment.

I note that the recent report of the Migration Advisory Committee recognises, that due to its distinctive economic position, there is a possible case for Northern Ireland to have its own regional salary threshold.

I welcome that the UK government will initiate a programme of engagement with stakeholders on the implementation of the points-based system which will begin in March and will focus on those sectors most impacted, including small and medium enterprises.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, in regard to her appointment of a Special Adviser, (i) whether she independently chose her special adviser or an allocation was made by her party; (ii) how it was made known, and to whom, that she was seeking to appoint a special adviser; (iii) whether a pool of candidates was considered; (iv) if so, how many were within the pool; (v) how any pool of candidates was assembled; (vi) what were the essential and desirable criteria set for the job; (vii) by what process was the choice made; (viii) what notes and records were made and kept of the process; (ix) how fair employment obligations were met; (x) on what date(s) was the job offered and accepted; (xi) what was the contractual start date; and (xii) was the range of available salary discussed with the appointee, or was the job offered and accepted without knowledge of the likely salary.

(AQW 2592/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The appointment of my Special Adviser followed the requirements set out in the Code for the Appointment of Special Advisers agreed by the Executive and published by the Department of Finance on 20 January. Salary details were confirmed to me by the Department of Finance on 14 February.

Alastair Ross was appointed on 21 February 2020 after he had been released from his other roles.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what conversations her officials have had with the Irish Government to progress the offer from An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, to jointly fund cross-border university development in the North West.

(AQW 3192/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My officials met with officials from the Republic of Ireland's Department of Business Education and Skills on 3rd February, during which there was a general discussion on university provision in the North West of Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what airlines have expressed an interest, to date, in taking over the air routes operated by Flybe.

(AQW 3314/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I was delighted that the Chief Executive Officer of Belfast City Airport had been able to reach agreement with Loganair who will take up two of the routes previously operated by Flybe from Belfast City Airport, and Eastern Airways who will take up another of the routes. I am encouraged to note that Belfast City Airport have stated that they have had interest in all of their route network and would be confident of announcing backfill for all routes in the future.

However, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant impact on NI's air connectivity, with commercial decisions being made by air carriers across the UK. This has meant that the Loganair routes from Belfast City Airport, are not yet operational, and each of the three airports in Northern Ireland have felt the additional pressure of this crisis.

Maintaining air connectivity with the GB mainland is critical, especially during this COVID-19 crisis period. Hence I am delighted that the Executive has secured £5.7million support for the lifeline passenger flights from the City of Derry Airport

and Belfast City Airport to London, which are being supported over April, May and June 2020 and which was announced on Friday 1 May 2020.

The funding will ensure lifeline services are maintained, protecting key air links across the Union which are vital for connecting critical workers and ensuring that those who need to travel at this time can continue to do so.

We will continue to work closely with the local airports in the months ahead, including, Belfast City Airport, as I fully recognise that air connectivity will be essential to rebuilding Northern Ireland's economy.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what discussions or negotiations are taking place about the governance and independence of the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) outside of the formal call for evidence by the Utility Regulator under license, between and among any of these groups listed, the Department of the Economy, Energy Branch within the Department, the Utility Regulator, SONI or Eirgrid; (ii) what minutes are being kept of any discussions or negotiations; and (iii) when will these minutes be made available in the Assembly Library.

(AQW 3395/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Two meetings were held on 23 January 2020 to discuss SONI governance and independence; one between the Head of the Civil Service, Eirgrid and the Head of Energy Group in my Department and a follow-up meeting between Eirgrid and the Head of Energy Group. Minutes of these meetings are confidential and they will not be published or placed in the Library.

The Department has not had any other discussions with the listed groups in relation to SONI governance and independence. Engagement continues with SONI in relation to the development of the new Energy Strategy.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how many staff are employed within her Department's information service; (ii) of these, how many are classed as press officers; and (iii) the annual cost of this service.

(AQW 3536/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) There are seven staff employed in the Department for the Economy Press Office
- (ii) Five of the Press Office team are information officers (press officers) and two are administration staff
- (iii) The salary and associated costs (media monitoring, travel and subsistence, social media advertising, photography and newspapers) for the Press Office in 2018/19 was £304,849.54

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what preparations are being made for Northern Ireland's universities to accept student undergraduate applications this year, if it is not possible for A-Level examinations to be sat in 2020.

(AQW 3838/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As autonomous bodies, Northern Ireland higher education institutions are responsible for their own admissions policies and my Department has no remit to intervene.

I fully understand that prospective students are concerned. Given that this is an unprecedented and challenging time, my officials continue to work closely with the universities and university colleges as the situation unfolds.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her Department's Brexit preparations, in line with the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3966/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has been extensively involved in supporting the NI economy through the unprecedented challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, throughout this I have been mindful that the UK Government has stated the transition period will not be extended, thus preparation for this remains a top priority.

I am disappointed to note that there has been no further clarity from UK Government since you last asked this question. I continue to press the UK Government for urgent clarity on how the Protocol, as well as commitments on unfettered access to the UK internal market, will be enacted.

Whilst the responsibility for enacting the Protocol lies primarily with UK Government, my officials are advancing work to ensure the Department and its Arm's Length Bodies' legislation, policies and services are as prepared as possible for the end of the transition period.

In addition, my officials continue to engage directly with businesses to understand how they may be affected by the Protocol and to consider what measures may be required to support them.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to provide assistance to social enterprises in Northern Ireland that cannot avail of any of the current COVID-19 business support measures, including a timetable for action.

(AQW 3967/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Small Business Support Grant is open to all businesses who are in receipt of either Small Business Rates Relief or Industrial Derating. If a Social Enterprise receives Charitable Exemption or another form of exemption they are not eligible to apply for this grant.

Social Enterprises that have a Total Net Annual Value of between £15,001 and £51,000 are eligible to apply for the £25,000 Business Support Grant for the retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors, subject to some exclusions.

The Executive has approved an additional £40 million for a Hardship Fund which is aimed at microbusinesses who do not qualify for the existing schemes and require financial support. Social Enterprises can apply for this fund if they meet the eligibility criteria. Further details including eligibility and application arrangements will be announced in the week commencing 11 May 2020.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy what support she plans to provide to estate agents who are unable to access the COVID-19: Small Business Support Grant Scheme.

(AQW 3978/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Small Business Support Grant Scheme is open to all businesses who are in receipt of Small Business Rates Relief or Industrial Derating and who have a Total Net Annual Value (NAV) of £15,000 or below.

Businesses with a Total NAV of between £15,001 and £51,000 in the retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors are eligible to apply for the £25,000 Business Support Grant scheme. However, this does not include estate agents as they are not classified under these sectors for rating purposes. This scheme was launched as the retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors have been some of the most significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department acknowledges that not all businesses can avail of the support provided by the existing grant schemes which were agreed by the Executive. As you will appreciate, this is an evolving situation and my Department, along with Executive colleagues, is working to identify means of offering support to local businesses during this difficult time.

The Executive has approved an additional £40 million for a Hardship Fund which is aimed at microbusinesses who do not qualify for the existing schemes and require financial support. The Hardship Fund was announced on 5 May. An estimated 8,000 businesses will be eligible for this scheme. Further details including eligibility and application arrangements will be announced in the week commencing 11 May 2020.

The Department recognises the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis on businesses. For those businesses who do not meet the criteria required for the Business Support Grant Schemes, there is a range of further support available including the three months business rates holiday for all Northern Ireland businesses and UK-wide level support including the Coronavirus Business interruption Schemes, Bounce Back Loan Scheme and Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Information on further support can be found at NI Business Info: www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/business-support/coronavirus

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to extend the COVID-19 Business Support Grant Scheme to be on a one grant per premises as opposed to one per business model.

(AQW 3979/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department acknowledges that many businesses operate out of multiple premises but will only be eligible for one grant under either the Small Business Support Grant, or the £25,000 Business Support Grant for the retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors.

There is limited funding available for the schemes and the Executive has taken the decision, at this stage, to limit eligible businesses with multiple premises to one grant so that support could be offered to all potentially eligible businesses.

As you will appreciate, this is an evolving situation and my Department, along with Executive colleagues, will keep existing means of support under review, as well as working to identify other support to local businesses during this difficult time.

My Department recognises the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis on businesses. There is a range of further support available including the three months business rates holiday for all Northern Ireland businesses and UK-wide level support including the Coronavirus Business interruption Schemes, Bounce Back Loan Scheme and Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Information on further support can be found at NI Business Info: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/business-support/coronavirus>

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to clarify the current status of the New Decade, New Approach commitment to close the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme, in light of recent developments.

(AQW 3989/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department is working to develop options for the future of the Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive scheme in line with the New Decade, New Approach commitment. Proposals will be considered by the Executive in due course.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what her Department can do to ensure that both Aer Lingus and George Belfast City Airport put in place health and safety measures to protect both staff and passengers from contracting COVID-19.

(AQW 4004/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has been in contact with officials from HSENI who have confirmed that they have no enforcement powers with regard to the actual numbers of people on board an aircraft. However they do have a role with regard to the application of the public health guidelines in the airports themselves. HSENI has been in contact with the 3 airports in Northern Ireland to look at how they can provide assurance of compliance with the public health guidelines on social distancing and hygiene.

If not already the case, airport operators will need to review their risk assessments with regard to COVID-19 to identify and implement any necessary additional control measures to ensure compliance with the PHA guidelines.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what business support grant is being developed for manufacturing businesses with a total net annual value over £15,001.

(AQW 4009/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are no specific plans to develop a grant scheme for manufacturing businesses with a Total Net Annual Value (NAV) over £15,001.

The £25,000 Business Support Grant scheme for eligible businesses in the retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors has been launched to support businesses in those sectors with a Total NAV of between £15,001 and £51,000. This was launched as those industries have been some of the most significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is acknowledged that not all businesses can avail of the support provided by the existing grant schemes. As you will appreciate, this is an evolving situation and my Department, along with Executive colleagues, is working to identify means of offering support to local businesses during this difficult time.

The Small Business Support Grant Scheme, agreed by the Executive, which was initially opened only to businesses in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief, has been expanded to include manufacturing businesses that receive Industrial Derating.

The Executive has approved an additional £40 million for a Hardship Fund which is aimed at microbusinesses who do not qualify for the existing schemes and require financial support. An estimated 8,000 businesses will be eligible for this scheme. Further details including eligibility and application arrangements will be announced in the week commencing 11 May 2020.

Support measures for businesses are being kept under review. All businesses are urged to review the existing NI specific support measures and UK wide schemes at www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-your-business.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how many prosecutions have resulted from the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme and how many cases for possible prosecution are under preparation.

(AQW 4014/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To date no prosecutions have resulted from the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme. Four cases are currently under investigation by the PSNI.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy (i) when she will publish the re-profiling of her departmental budget; and (ii) whether she will commit to redirecting a portion of any identified savings towards a student hardship fund .

(AQW 4022/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Details of the Department for the Economy's budget re-profiling will be available after June Monitoring is finalised. Whilst it is too early at this stage to comment on specific proposals, I am keeping the levels of expenditure within the student hardship fund under close review and I am continuing to explore with the Executive and Departmental officials what additional funding may be available, if needed.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what business support grant is being developed for businesses in rental properties with a total net annual value between £1,591 and £15,000.

(AQW 4023/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Small Business Support Grant is available to businesses who are a sole tenant of a rental property that has a Total Net Annual Value (NAV) of £15,000 or below. Businesses can apply for the grant and find further information at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£10000-small-business-grant-rental-properties-and-total-nav-£1590-or-below>.

The same web portal is used for businesses that own their own property which has a total NAV of £1,590 or below. However this NAV does not relate to rental properties.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, in respect of the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme, whether she can confirm that a tariff equivalent to that in Great Britain would not result in any overspend.

(AQW 4029/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Were a biomass installation to be accredited to the GB RHI scheme today, it would do so at a tariff of 3.15p/kWh for tier 1 (up to 3,066 hours of operation) and 2.21p/kWh for tier 2 (operation above 3,066 hours).

If all biomass installations accredited to the NI RHI scheme received incentive payments at this tariff rate, it is forecast that RHI spending would be within the available AME budget. As with all forecasts, this is based on a number of assumptions including on future biomass usage, inflation rates and available budget.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will seek to increase the resources and capacity of the Health and Safety Executive to assist employers and ensure a safe working environment for employees in response to COVID-19.

(AQW 4037/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In the early days of the pandemic HSENI staff received an increase in volume of calls for advice and complaints of 2,000% on normal business. All inspectorate staff were required to deal with this. As time has gone on the number of complaints etc., whilst not as just as high, remains significant and constant. The anticipated gradual return to work in many of our sectors will likely to see a sustained rise in the number of complaints and calls for advice coming into HSENI which will again put their limited resources under pressure.

It should be noted that HSENI are not the policy maker in this instance, as this is the domain of our public health colleagues. However HSENI has worked very effectively with employers, trade groups, employees, trade unions and others to interpret the public health guidance and bring about practical solutions to work situations which have allowed many workplaces to maintain operations. The model they have used of advising and working with organisations and enforcement where required has been successful and one I want to see continue.

HSENI's inspectorate staff, whilst small in number, have met the challenges presented by the current pandemic. The recruitment, training and warranting of health and safety inspectors takes approximately three years which means there is no easy or quick way to boost their numbers. For this reason the organisation must utilise its resources as it has been doing to best meet the demands it will face.

My Department will of course continue to support HSENI in fulfilling its functions and if there is a need to provide additional resources in the short or longer term, consider these favourably.

The resource issue is also one for our district councils who have responsibility for the enforcement of health and safety law in many businesses including offices, shops, restaurants and many of the premises on our high streets.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has (i) made representations to the Minister of Finance for a financial support package on behalf of the taxi industry; (ii) if so, what was the outcome; and (iii) when might a support package be available.

(AQW 4043/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Although no specific representations have been made to the Minister of Finance for a support package for the taxi industry, I recognise that not all sectors have received help to date. I and my Executive colleagues will continue to work to identify means of offering support to the economy during this difficult time.

Support for the self-employed is available through the Coronavirus Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS). This provides a taxable grant to be paid to the self-employed or partnerships which have suffered a loss of income, worth 80% of their profits up to a cap of £2,500 per month.

Further information regarding SEISS is available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-a-grant-through-the-coronavirus-covid-19-self-employment-income-support-scheme>.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the economic impact the City Deal for Londonderry will have throughout the Northwest, especially Limavady.

(AQW 4053/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The City Deal for Londonderry presents a tremendous opportunity to support sustained and inclusive growth in the North West. With the recent NI Executive agreement to provide match funding for both the City Deal and the Inclusive Futures Fund, an additional £210m from government will be available for investment across the region. Along with investment from Derry Strabane District Council and its partners, this funding, particularly into innovation and digital infrastructure, can provide a platform to support the growth of the private sector and deliver on the ambition for the region.

I fully support the Londonderry City Deal and my Department along with Invest NI and Tourism NI will continue to work with the Council and its partners to support the development of projects that represent value for money and will deliver benefits for all the people of the Northwest.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 1048/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 4085/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I wish to apologise for the delay in answering this question.

My Department is in receipt of two petroleum licence applications, PL1/16 from EHA Exploration Limited and PL2/16 from Tamboran Resources (UK) Limited.

Following technical and financial due diligence the Department has accepted both applications as valid applications.

My Department is currently assessing the significant number of responses submitted to the public consultation on both licence applications.

In considering the award of petroleum licences I recognise the current context of net-zero commitments and sustainability. In this context I am aware that any decision concerning petroleum licensing may be considered controversial and therefore, I have decided that the decision on whether or not to grant both Petroleum Licence applications, PLA1/16 and PLA2/16 should be referred to the Executive.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 22 May 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of Declan Kearney's recent comments that the institutions they lead are a beachhead to advance the debate on constitutional change and an engine towards Irish unity. (AQW 508/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Junior Minister Kearney participated in a RTE political panel and made the comments in a party political capacity.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in regard to the Written Ministerial Statement of 10 February 2020 on the Legislative Programme, when the statement referred to "agreement today by the Executive Committee", whether that means the Executive collectively agreed (i) the content of the various bills; (ii) only their timetabling, or both. (AQW 2056/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Committee agreed that the Bills listed in our Statement should constitute its Legislative Programme taking into account the general purpose of each Bill and their likelihood of introduction before the Summer recess.

Our Statement also advised members that all legislative proposals would be subject to the established procedures for Executive referral and consideration before their introduction. This will include consideration of their detailed content and agreement to their introduction.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, apart from the announced appointments of special advisers, whether (i) they have made any appointments under the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 since coming into office this year; and (ii) are any such appointments anticipated. (AQW 3173/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Apart from for special advisers, we have not made any appointments under the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 since coming into office, and have no current plans to do so.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) how many staff are employed within their Department's information service; (ii) of these, how many are classed as press officers; and (iii) the annual cost of this service. (AQW 3539/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In addition to the Head of the Executive Information Service, there are seven press officers in The Executive Office. Press Officers provide support to the First Minister, deputy First Minister, junior Ministers and departmental officials on core press office activity, ministerial support services, media relations and digital services.

There are three full time equivalent support staff.

The annual cost for this service is not available due to staff changes over the past year.

Mr McAleer asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the North South Ministerial Council institutional meeting held in Armagh on 11 March 2020. (AQO 376/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A North South Ministerial Council Institutional meeting took place in Armagh on Wednesday 11 March. The purpose of the meeting was to facilitate the appointment of two Irish Government nominees to the Board of InterTradeIreland and two Directors to the Board of Tourism Ireland Limited.

The appointments will ensure that the Boards of the Bodies are legally quorate.

Minister of State for European Affairs, Helen McEntee represented the Irish Government at the meeting. Junior Ministers Lyons and Kearney represented the Executive. A Statement on the meeting will be made to the Assembly.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department will explore the benefits of agri-tourism in Northern Ireland, in terms of (i) the overall economy; and (ii) in any post-COVID-19 planning for the agricultural sector.

(AQW 4017/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): My officials are currently working to develop a new Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland. This work has indicated the need for farm diversification, including potential agri-tourism activities, to generate new income sources which will contribute to both sustainability of family farms and to the wider rural economy. I intend to go out to consultation on the new Rural Policy Framework later this year but officials will also consider, from the work undertaken to date, what actions could contribute to post Covid 19 planning.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether a marine licensee for energy infrastructure has to enter into a bond or other financial guarantee to meet the costs of decommissioning infrastructure, environmental reinstatement and cleanup at the end of a marine licence period.

(AQW 4041/17-22)

Mr Poots: As the marine licensing authority for the Northern Ireland inshore region under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, my Department can grant a marine licence subject to conditions. The Department has not required applicants to enter into a bond or financial guarantee for decommissioning within a marine licence, as the Marine and Coastal Access Act is not an appropriate legislative mechanism. Typical decommissioning conditions contained within marine licences relate to matters of protecting the environment, human health and preventing interference with legitimate uses of the sea. This position is consistent with that of other UK Regulators.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many fines were issued for fly-tipping in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area, broken down by (i) ward; and (ii) the amount of each fine issued, in each year since 2015.

(AQW 4089/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department investigates incidents of significant illegal waste dumping and does not record instances of monetary fines issued under the term 'fly-tipping'. Fines for illegal waste dumping may be imposed as monetary penalties by the judiciary at the conclusion of court proceedings, and, since 2013, through fixed penalty notices issued by the Department. The majority of fly-tipping incidents are small scale and as such are dealt with by local councils.

Since 2015, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has issued twenty fixed penalty notices totalling £6,700, and achieved £26,000 of sentencing fines in eight court proceedings, for illegal waste dumping in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area. The Agency does not record this data at ward level, but the value of each fixed penalty and fine is set out below.

Fines for illegal waste dumping in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area since 2015

Year (fine imposed by Court)	Value of fine
2019	£0
2018	£6000
2018	£2500
2018	£2500
2018	£3000
2018	£2000
2016	£1000
2015	£2000
2015	£7000

Fixed penalty notices issued since 2015 for illegal waste dumping in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area

Year issued	No. of Notices	Value of penalties
2019	0	£0
2018	1	£400
2017	7	£2,700
2016	9	£2,700
2015	3	£900

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline a timetable for when (i) Roe Valley Country Park; and (ii) Ballykelly Forest could be reopened to the public.
(AQW 4102/17-22)

Mr Poots: Both Roe Valley Country Park and Ballykelly Forest have remained open to pedestrian access throughout the Covid-19 crisis with only certain facilities having been restricted. This allowed those who lived locally to continue to access these sites to undertake exercise in compliance with essential journeys and social distancing advice in the earlier stages of Covid-19 restrictions being applied.

Step 1 of the Executives Coronavirus Recovery Strategy as of 12th May, includes provision for the opening of Outdoor Spaces. However it is obviously necessary to take a cautious and measured approach to this reopening to ensure that social distancing can be maintained, in order to help prevent the virus from spreading further.

My Department will be adopting a phased approach to this, with the opening of car parks at our Country Parks and Forest Parks during this first stage. Opening of other on-site facilities such as toilets or playparks will be considered at a later stage.

I can confirm that I have approved the re-opening of carparks at Roe Valley Country Park and Ballykelly Forest with effect from 27th May 2020.

At present there is no set timetable for the re-opening of other visitor facilities within the Roe Valley Country Park such as the public toilets, visitor centre or food outlets which will be kept under review in line with Executive and Public Health Agency advice.

We also have to be careful to manage visitor numbers to avoid too many people using the same site at once. To that end, we are actively engaging with providers of other outdoor spaces and hope that collectively, we will be able to implement a co-ordinated approach to the reopening of sites that will enable people to have increased access to a range of outdoor spaces in their locality in the near future

It will be vitally important that once reopening begins, that users act in a socially and environmentally responsible way to ensure that we all stay safe

I would therefore stress that these easements on restrictions will continue to be subject to ongoing monitoring and review and I would urge the public to continue to follow social distancing advice when visiting these sites in order to protect themselves, other visitors and indeed staff working at these sites.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail examples in the second Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report where the duty to have due regard to rural needs has led to public authorities altering their policies.
(AQW 4163/17-22)

Mr Poots: The second Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report is an extensive document containing information sent to my department by public authorities on the exercise of their functions under section 1 of The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. Examples of policies that have been altered by Public Authorities include the relocation of Newtownhamilton Community Dental Clinic by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, the reduction in Local Office opening hours and the Revision of the Management of Lone Working Policy by the NIHE, and the revision of the School Crossing Policy Service by the Education Authority.

The Rural Needs Act has only been in operation for a relatively short period of time, however, I can assure you that my department will continue to work with public authorities to help ensure that the Act is implemented effectively to deliver positive and meaningful benefits for rural dwellers.

Department of Education

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to carry out essential health and safety maintenance and repair works to Omagh High School.
(AQW 3501/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Omagh High School is a Controlled school and as such responsibility for essential health and safety maintenance and repair works rests with the Education Authority (EA).

During the 2019/20 financial year, the Facilities Management Maintenance Service (FMS) within the EA completed railing and guarding works relating to Disability Discrimination Act and Health and Safety requirements at Omagh High School. FMS also completed an upgrade of the reception office and a hygiene room.

FMS will continue to carry out the normal annual planned preventative maintenance statutory inspections at the school and action any recommendation from them.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has plans in place to postpone school exams due to COVID-19 if necessary.

(AQW 3703/17-22)

Mr Weir: On Wednesday 18 March 2020 a joint statement by the First and Deputy First Ministers highlighted that as a consequence of COVID-19 it would now be necessary to make adjustments to the examinations scheduled for Summer 2020.

On 19 March 2020 I announced that we are not proceeding with GCSEs, AS and A2 level examinations this summer. The safeguarding of everyone's health was of paramount importance in reaching this decision.

On 16 April, I made a further announcement outlining the process for students completing GCSEs, AS and A Levels and how qualifications will be awarded.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether he will consider making Education Authority funding available to support local youth work in isolated rural areas.

(AQW 4108/17-22)

Mr Weir: Addressing the needs of young people living in rural isolation remains a key priority for my Department, as set out in Priorities for Youth - Improving Young People's Lives Through Youth Work, and as identified within the Education Authority's (EA) associated Regional Assessment of Needs 2020-2023 and Regional Youth Development Plan 2020-2023 (RYDP). The actions set out within the RYDP are also reflected within each council area local youth development plan together with specific local needs.

While budget decisions for 2020-21 have not yet been finalised, recognising the importance of delivering services to young people, in particular those most vulnerable in our society, I have advised the EA to proceed with an allocation of interim funding to enable the continued provision of youth services, including those in rural areas.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education (i) to outline his engagement with academically-selected post-primary schools regarding transfer tests in autumn 2020; (ii) whether he has considered cancelling the transfer tests in 2020 as a response to COVID-19; and (iii) to outline the reasons why the transfer test cannot be delayed longer than two weeks.

(AQW 4160/17-22)

Mr Weir: Neither I nor my Department have had any direct engagement with post-primary schools regarding the transfer tests. Any engagement or decisions regarding the organisation, timing or cancellation of the tests is ultimately a matter for schools and the test providers and my Department has no role in those decisions. However, I understand that the test providers engaged with a number of schools in considering their proposals for the tests in 2020.

The tests fit into an overall timetable for the post-primary transfer process which applies to all young people transferring regardless of whether or not they sit the tests. The timing of when the tests are taken is not as significant as the timing of the issue of test results. This, however, is a matter for the test providers and I am unable to intervene in their internal processes. Were results not to issue until mid-March the result would be that placement letters would not issue until the summer holidays and admissions appeals hearings would run well past the start of term in September 2021.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education how many Principals employed within Grade 2 Primary Schools are listed on the L22 Salary Grade.

(AQW 4197/17-22)

Mr Weir: The number of Principals currently on Salary Point L22 within Group 2 Primary Schools in Northern Ireland is so low that it risks the possible identification of individuals.

Source: The information above was extracted from the Teachers' payroll system.

Notes:

- 1 The figures supplied are taken as at 21 May 2020 based on up-to-date information received from employers at that date.
- 2 The figures supplied exclude voluntary grammar schools.

Department of Finance

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of deaths in the East Belfast Constituency caused by (i) alcohol abuse; (ii) illegal drugs; and (iii) the misuse of prescription drugs, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4054/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):

- (i) NISRA collates statistics on the number of deaths due to alcohol-specific causes (i.e. deaths wholly attributed to alcohol). There were 19 alcohol-specific deaths registered in the administrative area of Belfast East in 2018, 20 in 2017 and 29 in 2016.
- (ii)(iii) Drug death statistics are routinely produced using standard definitions of 'drug-related' deaths (i.e. where the underlying cause of death is drug poisoning, drug abuse or drug dependence); and 'drug misuse' deaths (i.e. a subset of the above where any of the substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) are involved).

Not all of the drugs controlled under the Act are illegal, and also, NISRA does not hold information on drugs misuse relating solely to prescription medicines.

Using the standard definitions:

- there were 14 drug-related deaths registered in the administrative area of Belfast East in 2018, 13 in 2017 and 8 in 2016.
- There were 14 deaths due to drug-misuse registered in the administrative area of Belfast East in 2018, 11 in 2017 and 6 in 2016 which will include deaths due to both (ii) illegal drugs and (ii) misuse of prescription drugs (if there were any).

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Finance for a breakdown of the money provided to the Executive to cover costs relating to COVID-19.

(AQW 4101/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Chancellor, in his Budget on 11 March 2020, announced initial measures to provide support through the economic disruption caused by COVID-19. Since then there have been a number of further announcements on the funding being made available for the COVID-19 response. While some of the support provided is UK wide, the Executive receives Barnett consequentials from Treasury on any funding provided for England only measures. The Executive is free to allocate this funding in line with local needs and priorities.

The attached table provides a breakdown of the money provided to the Executive to cover costs relating to COVID-19.

COVID-19 Barnett Consequentials

England Only Measures	£million
Budget20 LA hardship fund	16.4
Business support grants (total cost)	406.9
Business rates reliefs (total cost)	353.2
Charity support - National Lottery Community Fund	10.2
Charity support - direct grants (inc hospices)	8.5
Fisheries Support	0.2
Rugby League Support	0.4
Coronavirus Emergency Response fund	
Enhanced NHS discharge/suspension of means test	42.6
Local Authority COVID support package	52.4
Purchasing independent sector capacity	45.2
Shielding - food packages	6.9
Shielding - DHSC elements	9.6
DfT - Emergency Management Agreements	95.0
PPE procurement	3.3
DWP additional funding for operational resilience	4.7
Call centre for the National Shielding Centre	1.8
NHS Workforce	48.6

England Only Measures	£million
GP and Community Pharmacy Easter Bank Holiday Opening	2.9
Emergency Management Agreement for railway services (19-20)	19.3
Advance Ticket Refund	1.0
Voucher scheme to replace free school meals	7.1
Shielding - food packages	1.9
Councils	52.4
Care Home Support	19.7
Grant Funding for MIND	0.2
Death in Service Payments	0.8
Transport for London	35.9
Total	1246.9

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance to outline the current position for civil servants obtaining wage details for mortgage applications; and whether some departments are not administering or issuing pay slips and wage details for April and beyond. (AQW 4127/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The long-standing arrangement for civil servants who need confirmation of employment and earnings by way of a reference for mortgage lenders or landlords is that a written statement of such particulars is provided to the employee on request. This facility remains available.

As regards the regular provision of salary details on payslips, apart from a few that are necessarily posted directly to home addresses, payslips are sent by courier to departments at their office locations, for distribution to staff. This process was disrupted during March and April by the closure of some buildings, but is now resuming.

My Department has brought forward plans to make payslips available electronically to most staff and expects to implement these arrangements soon.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether he will make additional funding available to the Department of Infrastructure to assist Translink in making good the deficits caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQW 4171/17-22)

Mr Murphy: On 19 May 2020 I announced to the assembly that the Executive had agreed to allocate £30m to the Department for Infrastructure to funding pressures relating to loss of income due to COVID-19, in particular those faced by Translink. This is in addition to the £20m allocated in the Executive's 2020-21 Budget to address Translink's underlying recurrent deficit

The Executive will continue to look at the pressures facing Translink due to COVID-19 going forward.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the roll out of Peace Plus funding following the end of the consultation period on 28 February 2020. (AQW 4188/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) are currently preparing proposals for a draft Programme for consideration by the Executive, NSMC and the European Commission. A formal consultation is planned for the autumn with the programme finalised by the end of the year to allow it to commence in 2021.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance whether caravan site businesses have been covered by the three month business rates holiday; and whether they are included in the Minister's announcement of no business rates for the rest of this year. (AQW 4189/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The 3 months rates holiday that I introduced from 1 April applies to all businesses and will now be extended for a further month until 31 July. Rate relief of 100% will then be provided from the 1 August 2020 to 31 March 2021 to the retail, hospitality, leisure, tourism and child care sectors, to the effect that these sectors will not pay any business rates this financial year. Holiday caravan sites are considered to be within the leisure sector. The precise details will be included in Regulations to be laid before the Assembly.

Department of Health

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what assessment has been made of the increased application of telemedicine in order to maximise the use of existing spare capacity in certain disciplines of acute and chronic hospital medicine.

(AQW 3973/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Remote monitoring services have been used by Trusts prior to the pandemic and active consideration is being given to increasing the use of such services.

Work had been undertaken pre-pandemic to consolidate learnings from a number of Trust pilots in different specialties in respect of the use of remote clinics / virtual consultations. These demonstrated that virtual clinics were feasible not only for review appointments, but also to assist in assessment and diagnosis processes, in the delivery of therapies remotely and to facilitate patient education.

As part of the pandemic response, Trusts have been testing different video conferencing systems to respond to patient needs on an ad-hoc short term basis and work is ongoing to enable the deployment of a virtual consultation platform that will meet clinical requirements across both acute and community settings both during the current pandemic and into the future.

We are continuing to assess where and how telemedicine could be deployed to further help with capacity management both during and after the current pandemic.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is (i) aware of any publicly funded Health Service staff in Northern Ireland working with the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) to provide abortion pills by post up to ten weeks gestation; and (ii) receiving notification of abortions carried out by abortion pills supplied by BPAS.

(AQW 4007/17-22)

Mr Swann: Regulation 10 of The Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 prevents this information being shared.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the demand on the health system from implementing the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020; and how the resource needs will be met.

(AQW 4030/17-22)

Mr Swann: For the last full year for which statistics are available, 1,053 women from Northern Ireland chose to have an abortion in England or Wales. My Department would therefore anticipate at least this level of demand, and potentially higher, in Northern Ireland. I expect the UK Government to provide the resources necessary to put in place all the sexual and reproductive services, including abortion services, required by the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, during Maternal Mental Health awareness week, what support he is providing for pregnant women and new mothers during the COVID-19 crisis; and at what stage is the business case for the perinatal mother and baby unit.

(AQW 4059/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health is working with the Public Health Agency, the Health and Social Care Board and Health and Social Care to coordinate a comprehensive response to the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in the immediate and longer term. An online Apps library has recently been launched to provide health and wellbeing support during these difficult times. This can be accessed at <https://apps4healthcareni.hscni.net/>

The business case for a dedicated perinatal mother and baby unit is still being developed.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health (i) what amount of the 2020-21 budget will be spent on mental health; (ii) whether the mental health share of the overall budget increased or decreased in comparison to previous years; and (iii) whether he has considered parity of esteem for mental health, including any additional spend to address increased need due to COVID-19.

(AQW 4060/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mental health is one of my top priorities and I am committed to improving mental health services in Northern Ireland. My Department is keeping the need for additional spend on mental health as a consequence of COVID-19 under review.

An online Apps library has recently been launched to provide health and wellbeing support during these difficult times. This can be accessed at <https://apps4healthcareni.hscni.net/>. In addition, Stress Control are offering a free 6 session cognitive behavioural therapy class. To take part, users should access www.stresscontrol.org.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many residents from nursing homes have been admitted to hospital with COVID-19.

(AQW 4061/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no specific admission source recorded identifying admissions to hospital from nursing or care homes. Admission sources for those admissions where a confirmed or suspected diagnosis of Covid-19 are provided in the table

below. Figures reported cover the period from February 1st 2020 to May 17th 2020. Please note that the figures provided are provisional and subject to change.

Number of individuals admitted to hospital with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 (01/02/2020 - 17/05/2020)

Admission Source	Number of individuals
Usual Residence	4,547
NHS - Gen/YPD/A&E	551
Other - Non NHS or Nursing Home	246
Boards Residential Accom.	14
Other/ Unknown	15
Total	5, 373

Source: Patient Administration System (download 18/05/2020).

Figures based on first Covid-19 admission (confirmed or suspected) of an individual within the timeframe.

Data represents number of individuals and not number of hospital admissions.

Data are provisional and subject to change.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what mental health services are available in North Down to help people who are struggling with mental health issues due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

(AQW 4062/17-22)

Mr Swann: Given the current situation, it is not appropriate to refer the question to the HSCB for detailed input as it would detract from its focus on delivering front-line services during the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

However, mental health services in Northern Ireland are provided in line with the regional stepped care model. This approach remains during the COVID-19 emergency. Mental health services have not stopped, and all who need care and treatment will be provided with services that are clinically appropriate.

To meet the specific COVID-19 mental health need we have collaborated with several organisations to create an Apps library that will help mitigate the stress put on traditional services and health and wellbeing support during these difficult times. This can be accessed at <https://apps4healthcareni.hscni.net/>. In addition, Stress Control are offering a free 6 session cognitive behavioural therapy class. To take part, users should access www.stresscontrol.org.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether there are financial measures in place to support podiatrists through the COVID-19 crisis.

(AQW 4068/17-22)

Mr Swann: Independent podiatrists are privately run businesses and are not Health and Social Care employees and as such the department does not have policy responsibility, nor does it hold a budget for this group of people. These practitioners are requesting assistance in relation to access to business grants and reduction in business rates during the Covid-19 pandemic. As these queries relate to business issues rather than professional practice or policy they have been previously referred to Department of Economy to address.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the requirement on patients to submit personal data to Radox before test results are provided.

(AQW 4069/17-22)

Mr Swann: Radox have been commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care London (DHSC) to support Covid-19 testing as part of the National Initiative. They act as a Data Processor on behalf of DHSC and their processing of personal data in relation to testing is managed through GDPR compliant contracts between Radox and DHSC as Data Controller. The relevant testing information is then shared with the four nations Public Health organisations in order to ensure appropriate management of Covid-19 testing as part of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. All organisations which are Data Processors or Data Controllers as part of this process are required to comply with GDPR and DPA when processing personal data.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to provide or assist in the provision of personal protective equipment to dentists.

(AQW 4070/17-22)

Mr Swann: Personal protective equipment (PPE) is an essential element of infection prevention within general dental practices. As dental treatment places the practitioner and the patient at close proximity to one another and often involves procedures where there is contact with bodily fluids it is essential that dentists have the recommended PPE for the

procedures undertaken. General dental practitioners have always sourced their own PPE and have been happy with this arrangement as it permits them to choose from the extensive range of PPE models and sizes available whilst still allowing compliance with the relevant standards. This arrangement has been facilitated by the remuneration model for general dental practitioners which contains funding for practice running costs including PPE.

I am aware that supplies of PPE for general dental practitioners from dental supply houses are limited and this situation is being monitored by my officials. The availability of PPE through commercial routes will be particularly important as we look to the future to increase dental activity in practices consistent with the five guiding principles set out in Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-Making. The situation will be kept under review as plans to ease restrictions within general dental practice are developed.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the need for the uplift in Allied Health Professional undergraduate commissioning for this September's intake, to take account of both the ongoing transformation process and the ongoing Coronavirus crisis.

(AQW 4074/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recently confirmed an increase by 40 in the annual undergraduate pre-registration Allied Health Profession (AHP) training places commissioned by my Department, effective for the September 2020 intake. This grows the annual programme of AHP pre-registration training places to 285 and means that the number of commissioned training places has been expanded by 16% since 2019/20 and 45% since 2007/08.

Future commissioning will be informed by current and forthcoming AHP workforce reviews, as well as considerations in relation to affordability and capacity within universities and the HSC to provide placements.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what reduction there has been on the number of agency nurses engaged in the Health Service in hospitals where bed occupancy has dropped during the COVID-19 crisis.

(AQW 4075/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of agency nurses engaged in the Health Service in hospitals is not held; instead, the Department monitors expenditure. Full year figures for 19/20 will not be available until June at the earliest, with figures for the first quarter of 20/21 available in the early autumn.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health (i) what progress has been made in resolving the neurology misdiagnoses by Dr Michael Watt in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) how the affected patients are being kept informed of progress, including professional communication channels; and (iii) when this matter will be concluded.

(AQW 4082/17-22)

Mr Swann: Over 4,100 people have had their treatment reviewed to date as part of the first and second phases of the recall of the former patients of Dr Michael Watt. There are currently no people waiting for a review of their treatment.

The Outcomes Report from the first phase of the recall was published in December 2019. It was planned that the findings from the second phase of the recall would be published in the first half of 2020 together with an announcement in respect of the need for a further phase of the recall.

However, the staff involved in taking this work forward have been redeployed as part of the response to the Covid-19 outbreak. In light of the ongoing work to put recovery arrangements in place for the NI health & social care sector it is not possible at this time to provide a date for the publication of the findings from the second phase of the recall.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail the (a) number of personal protection equipment (PPE) orders placed with Chinese companies; (b) companies with whom the PPE orders were placed; and (c) value of these PPE orders; and (ii) whether all these orders were fulfilled on time.

(AQW 4088/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to the commercially sensitive nature of this information, it will not be possible to provide you with the information request.

I can however confirm that every avenue is being explored for the securing of PPE in response to the covid-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) for an update on the Access to New Drugs policy announced by his Department in September 2018; (ii) whether patients in Northern Ireland are able to access Avastin via the NHS; (iii) to detail all the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence-approved cancer drugs unavailable via the NHS in Northern Ireland, but accessible via the NHS in other regions of the UK; and (iv) why some cancer drugs are unavailable via the NHS in Northern Ireland, but accessible via the NHS in other UK regions.

(AQW 4091/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- i On 12 September 2018 the Department announced that drugs approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) for use through the Cancer Drug Fund in England will now be considered in line with existing arrangements for NI endorsement of NICE recommendations and be equally accessible here. The individual funding request process (IFR policy) which allows for access to unapproved drugs has also been modernised and is in the final stages of implementation, though this has been delayed due to Covid-19.
- ii. NICE is considering bevacizumab (Avastin) for many different cancer indications. Each appraisal is independent and will look at the clinical and cost-effectiveness of the drug compared to those already available on the NHS in that area. Where NICE has recommended bevacizumab (Avastin) for use, it is available for suitable patients in Northern Ireland.
- iii. All those cancer medicines recommended by NICE are available for clinically suitable patients in Northern Ireland.
- iv. Each UK jurisdiction has separate arrangements to determine access to cancer therapies that have not been fully endorsed by NICE. Decisions to prescribe medicines are the responsibility of clinicians, working in partnership with patients and their families, taking into account the evidence, the potential risks and benefits of treatment and individual circumstances. It is not possible for me to assess why medicines may or may not be prescribed in any other jurisdiction.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what is the protocol governing the transfer of COVID-19 patients from care or nursing homes to hospital; and, of those residents of care homes who have died, how many were hospitalised.
(AQW 4093/17-22)

Mr Swann: The protocol governing the transfer of a patient from a care home to a hospital can be found under Paragraph 63 (b) of the COVID-19: Guidance for Nursing and Residential Care Homes in Northern Ireland.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-guidance-nursing-and-residential-care-homes-northern-ireland>

We do not have the required data to provide you with the number of deaths of care home residents after being hospitalised.

However information on care home deaths is published on the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and currently updated on a weekly basis.

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/ni-summary-statistics/coronavirus-covid-19-statistics>

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what is the protocol governing the transfer of COVID-19 patients from hospital to care or nursing homes and the management of patients thereafter.
(AQW 4094/17-22)

Mr Swann: The protocol governing the discharge of a patient from a hospital to a care home can be found under Paragraphs 25-31 and 39-40 and Annex C of the COVID-19: Guidance for Nursing and Residential Care Homes in Northern Ireland. It can be viewed through the link below:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-guidance-nursing-and-residential-care-homes-northern-ireland>

After the appropriate period of isolation the management of a resident thereafter will be on the basis of their individual care plan.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has provided forms for (i) certification; and (ii) notification of abortions under Regulations 9 and 10 respectively and whether he intends to do so.
(AQW 4098/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has not provided forms for certification or notification of abortions. These will be considered once a decision in relation to commissioning has been taken by the Executive.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health why testing for COVID-19 is not taking place for all staff in nursing homes, given the number of deaths.
(AQW 4099/17-22)

Mr Swann: As I have recently announced COVID-19 testing will be made available to all care home residents and staff across Northern Ireland. Testing is currently available for: all patients being discharged to a care home from hospital; anyone entering a care home from their own home or supported living or other community facility; care home staff with symptoms or whose household members have symptoms; any suspected case in a care home – i.e. anyone with symptoms; and to all staff and residents in a care home where there is a potential outbreak or cluster of infections. Testing is also underway for all residents and staff in homes where there have been previous outbreaks that have not yet concluded.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) whether any planned treatment for cancer or other serious illness has been postponed or provided less frequently because of the COVID-19 pandemic; (ii) whether waiting times for cancer treatments have increased due to COVID-19; and (iii) to outline the COVID-19 risk to patients receiving cancer treatment.
(AQW 4109/17-22)

Mr Swann: In answer to your question:

- i) Whilst there has been a necessary restructuring of services to permit an appropriate response to COVID-19 staff worked incredibly hard to ensure that urgent and emergency cancer treatment continued during the pandemic surge. Unfortunately, many procedures and diagnostic appointments have had to be postponed or delayed. When a decision is taken to delay diagnostics or treatment during the response to COVID-19, safety netting is in place to ensure that these patients resume on the appropriate pathway as soon as it is safe to do so.
- ii) Waiting times for cancer treatments have been affected due to COVID-19. Part of the inevitable reduction in activity is due to the need to introduce measures to make treatment available safely.
- iii) Chemotherapy medications and some targeted therapies for cancer can cause temporary depletion of the immune system and increased the risk of poor outcomes for those infected with COVID-19. Age is also a significant risk factor both for cancer and COVID-19. Cancer specialists are actively discussing the added risks posed by the Covid-19 infection with patients to help them decide on the best course of action for them. The risk of cancer not being treated optimally has to be balanced with the risk of the patient becoming seriously ill from COVID-19. Trusts have arrangements in place to manage the care of people with Covid-19 separately from other patients.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health what plans he has for the long-time vacant site of the former Joss Cardwell Centre at the junction of Circular Road and Holywood Road.

(AQW 4145/17-22)

Mr Swann: This site remains critical to planning of the Belfast Trust's Children's Residential Care Services and it is likely to be used either in connection with the provision of residential and short break placements for children with a learning disability or for other residential services. If these plans do not come to fruition, the Trust will declare the property surplus to its requirements. If there are no expressions of interest from the public sector the Trust will put the property on the market for sale.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to extend COVID-19 testing to all domiciliary care and other frontline community healthcare workers.

(AQW 4167/17-22)

Mr Swann: Domiciliary care staff and other frontline community healthcare staff with symptoms of COVID-19 can avail of testing. There are currently no plans to extend testing for these staff however my Department will continue to keep this matter under constant review.

Further details on how to access COVID-19 testing can be found at; <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-covid-19>

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether (i) support has been received from the EU Solidarity Fund with regards to flooding; and (ii) this can be accessed after the transition period.

(AQW 3199/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Following flooding in 2015/16, my Department had contributed to an application to the EU Solidarity Fund alongside GB. I can confirm that my Department did not receive any EU funding in respect of this application.

Officials have advised that a further application to an EU Solidarity Fund after the transition period would not be eligible for funding.

However, I am keen to ensure that any opportunities for potential EU funding support are fully explored.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) the position regarding MOT extension if the car has a SORN certificate and the owner wishes to tax and insure the car; (ii) whether the exemption will apply to this vehicle; and (iii) the procedure to apply.

(AQW 3998/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All eligible vehicles, which includes cars, whose existing MOT certificate expired from 26 March 2020 or will expire before testing resumes will be issued with Temporary Exemption Certificates (TEC) and will be automatically exempt from testing for a full 12 months. For vehicles which have previously been issued with a TEC, their TEC will be automatically extended to the maximum timeframes set out in legislation, up to a maximum period of 12 months from their last MOT expiry date.

Vehicles which have been SORN'ed and have an MOT certificate which has not expired by 12 months or more will qualify for a TEC. This will allow the owner to tax and insure their vehicle.

From 11 May, TECs will automatically be generated from DVA's system for all eligible vehicles, without the owner of the vehicle needing to take any action. Owners of vehicles not registered in Northern Ireland, which are not on the DVA's system, must contact the DVA using the following email address dva.customerservices@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk and provide the vehicle details for a TEC to be processed and issued. It is important to note that DVA will not be issuing a hard copy of the TEC to customers.

Vehicles whose MOT certificate has expired by more than 12 months do not qualify for an exemption. More detailed information on TECs can be found at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-motoring>.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to introduce a free or discounted parking scheme for low paid, frontline workers.

(AQW 4035/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is responsible for on street parking charges and parking charges in some park and ride sites. I suspended all of these charges on 25 March 2020, because of the current Covid-19 emergency. The setting of parking charges in off street public car parks is the responsibility of Local Councils.

I very much appreciate the invaluable work being carried out by our frontline workers during this pandemic.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to outline what action she has taken in respect of the planning permission for a wind turbine on Knock Iveagh, following the local authority review of the case; and (ii) whether she will ensure that any rescinding of planning permission will be at no cost to the local authority.

(AQW 4038/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Development at the Knock Iveagh site remains under consideration by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. Whilst these processes are ongoing, it would not be appropriate for me to take any actions which could either influence or prejudice the Council's deliberations.

Any decision in relation to rescinding or discontinuance in this case, of planning permission at Knock Iveagh is a matter for the Council in the first instance. I am, therefore, not in a position to comment on how costs might be allocated or met.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to address the ongoing traffic congestion, excluding during the current lockdown situation, in Dundonald village.

(AQW 4055/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully understand that prior to the current lockdown, congestion affected many of our arterial routes and connected residential streets, not only in Dundonald, but throughout the wider Belfast area.

The problem of dealing with congestion in our main cities and towns is not something I believe can only be addressed with localised road improvements, so I am focussing on a recovery where we will have less car travel and more walking and cycling. I believe that by changing travel habits, we can transform our communities to inspire a new way of living that will be our new normal.

Prior to the lockdown officials had been monitoring the traffic in Dundonald and it appears the traffic turning right into Cherryhill Road on occasions blocks the Upper Newtownards Road causing traffic to queue back through the Dunlady Road/Robb's Road junction. This is accentuated by the presence of the bus lane on the Upper Newtownards Road. I am pleased to advise that some modifications have recently been made at this location, to encourage traffic to pass right-turning traffic on the inside and this will help to improve traffic flow. My Department also has a CCTV camera installed at the Dunlady junction and this allows officials to monitor live traffic conditions.

I can advise that officials are also considering options for new Park & Ride facilities at Newtownards and Comber. Implementation of these schemes, subject to funding, would reduce traffic volumes through Dundonald and help address the problems you identify.

It is not possible to provide further detail on progression of these schemes until decisions are made in relation budget allocations. In making those decisions, I will give full consideration to the need for Park and Ride and other sustainable travel programmes, which you will appreciate, must compete with the many other demands on my budget.

In the longer term, my officials are developing new integrated plans which deliver support for public transport, encourage more walking and cycling, better manage car commuting and promote sustainable development - all in an effort to improve the environment and people's lives. To this end, my officials are currently preparing, for my consideration, a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan, which will build on these commitments. This is still in development and will be subject to full public consultation.

I hope this information helps explain my position on this issue.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to Individual Vehicle Approval Tests, whether (i) timescales exist for resumption; or (ii) remote assessment procedures are being considered as an alternative to resumption.

(AQW 4057/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that the decision to suspend all testing has caused inconvenience for some customers who use our services, including where an Individual Vehicle Approval (IVA) test is required and a Temporary Exemption Certificate is not applicable.

Given the impact that the suspension of testing has had on businesses, I am keeping the position under review with the aim of reintroducing IVA services as soon as it is safe to do so, taking account of guidance on social distancing and in line with the NI Executive's Pathway to Recovery, to ensure the safety of staff and customers during the testing process.

The IVA test requires the physical examination of a vehicle and, therefore, remote assessment procedures are not considered to be a viable option at this time. When I am satisfied that it is safe to resume IVA testing again, I will ensure this is communicated immediately to our customers.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what actions are being taken to ensure that adequate support will be available for the freight sector during COVID-19 to ensure supply lines remain open.

(AQW 4063/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise that it is essential that the work of the freight sector continues to the greatest extent possible through the Covid-19 crisis. A key objective for me and my Executive colleagues at this time is to ensure the maintenance of critical supply routes and that the freight sector is able to support Northern Ireland's economic recovery in the coming weeks and months. As such, I have put in place a range of measures to support the sector including: securing a financial package for Ferry Operators funded jointly by the UK Government and the Executive; introducing a range of regulatory measures such as a relaxation of drivers' hours for all sectors and a suspension of all MOT tests for commercial vehicles; and relaxations of other requirements in areas such as CPC, tachographs, medical assessments and planning restrictions.

While financial support for the freight sector is a matter for the Department of the Economy, I will continue to do all that I can to support these efforts alongside Executive colleagues.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when will the assessment of delivery capacity for capital works be shared with Members; and (ii) whether there is potential for funding to be redirected to alleviate pressures caused by COVID-19.

(AQW 4064/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am currently considering and prioritising the £558m capital allocation made available to me to agree a 2020/21 Departmental Capital Plan which I would be happy to share with Committee members in the coming weeks when it is finalised.

During the COVID-19 restrictions, only some essential capital programmes are continuing as described in the officials' briefing pack (response to Q9) that you received in advance of the Committee session on 29th April when I discussed the Covid 19 response and related cost pressures.

My intention through the Capital Plan is to deliver safe water and wastewater infrastructure, address regional imbalance, connect communities and tackle the climate emergency by promoting safer, cleaner, greener, healthier communities and thereby improving lives. This Capital Plan will reflect the impact of the COVID 19 crisis on my Department's own internal capacity and potentially reduced capacity within the construction industry.

The Department of Finance budget guidelines allow capital funding up to a level of £1m to be transferred within the Department (unless ringfenced) to meet other Departmental Capital pressures. Above this level, surplus capital funding must be surrendered to the Department of Finance for reallocation. Any Departmental capital surpluses cannot however be used to address the current Departmental COVID 19 resource pressures of £181m and as the member is aware there are certainly no easements in resource budget anticipated.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what actions are being taken to ensure that essential services are not negatively impacted by the suspension of Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

(AQW 4065/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that the decision to suspend all testing has caused inconvenience for some customers who use our services, including where an Individual Vehicle Approval (IVA) test is required and a Temporary Exemption Certificate is not applicable.

Given the impact that the suspension of testing has had on businesses, I am keeping the position under review with the aim of reintroducing IVA services as soon as it is safe to do so, taking account of guidance on social distancing and in line with the NI Executive's Pathway to Recovery, to ensure the safety of staff and customers during the testing process.

My priority is to keep people safe and minimise disruption to our services. As soon as I am satisfied that it is safe to resume IVA testing again, I will ensure this is communicated immediately to our customers and Members.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure what responsibility and liability her Department bears for the numerous pollution incidents of the River Faughan and Tributaries Special Area of Conservation emanating from the ongoing construction works for the new A6 Derry to Dungiven Road.

(AQW 4086/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Liability for any pollution incidents caused by the construction of the A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe scheme rests with the contractor, as the consent holder for discharges to the River Faughan and its tributaries. My Department is responsible for overseeing the works in accordance with the Conditions of Contract. I can assure you that my officials have been proactive in managing the environmental aspects of this project, and are working with colleagues from NIEA to minimise the risk of future pollution incidents.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has engaged with the Civil Aviation Authority on the issue of guidance for health and safety procedures for local airports in response to COVID-19.

(AQW 4087/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My main powers relating to our three main airports are set down in the Airports (NI) Order 1994 (1994 Order) and are restricted to certain matters relating to the management of airports. These are powers to control land in the interests of the safe and efficient use of airports, to control noise, make byelaws, provide for airport constabularies and airport consultative committees, and to give grants to assist capital expenditure.

I am not therefore responsible for air travel advice and, as such, I have not engaged with the Civil Aviation Authority regarding this matter. Aviation matters in the North, including airline safety, are the responsibility of the Department for Transport.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she can provide a timeline on when she will make a decision on the planning application for the North-South Interconnector project.

(AQW 4104/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The applications remain under consideration and my officials are continuing to progress them to a point where a report and recommendation can be placed before me. While I am hopeful that this will be done shortly, given the current situation regarding Covid-19, it is not possible to give an exact timeline for a decision at this time.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she intends to announce funding for greenway schemes.[R]

(AQW 4130/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that I have announced the creation of a Walking and Cycling Champion position in my Department with responsibility for taking forward work to deliver safe routes that give people the freedom and confidence to walk and cycle as part of their everyday routine.

Currently, I am considering carefully how I can assist in the development of greenways as part of my vision to enable greater sustainable transport options that connect communities, tackle the impact of climate change and improve lives.

My Department continues to operate under challenging budget constraints and the current COVID-19 emergency has added additional load to that budget. However, as I have indicated, I am keen to take decisions in relation to funding as soon as possible.

Department of Justice

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Justice to what extent will the new Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill cover isolating family and friends, especially in the situation where two people no longer live together.

(AQW 4008/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Behaviour which has the effect of isolating a partner, former partner or close family member from friends, family members or other sources of social interaction or support would be captured by the new domestic abuse offence which is included in the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. The draft legislation is currently at Committee stage in the Assembly. The offence will apply to partners, ex-partners or family regardless of whether or not they live together.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many Northern Ireland Prison Service staff have been tested for COVID-19; and (ii) how many prisoners, in all prison establishments, have been tested for COVID-19.

(AQW 4039/17-22)

Mrs Long: To be tested for COVID-19 the people in our care and staff must meet the working case definition for the illness, i.e. "a new continuous cough or high temperature." The working case definition has been set by Public Health England and has been adopted by the Public Health Agency within Northern Ireland: the Department of Health criteria apply to all testing including within prisons.

The testing of staff began through agreement between the Departments of Justice and Health on 9 April 2020.

Up to 18:00 on the 07/05/20, in total 82 Prison Service staff have been referred to the testing centres for tests to be completed. 11 staff were found not have met the case definition and were not tested. The remaining 71 staff members were tested.

Up to and including 18:00 on the 07/05/20, in total 27 prisoners have been suspected of having COVID-19 and 22 have been tested. The breakdown is shown in the table below:

	Suspected	Tested
HBW	2	2
MGBY	17	14
MGL	8	6
All sites	27	22

Finally, I wrote to the Minister of Health on 12th April 2020 seeking his agreement to extend testing further, including routine testing of all new committals to the prison system. The South Eastern Trust have now been authorised to start this process for all new committals with effect from 12th May 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice why the PSNI communications review is reducing the deployment of the words 'Northern Ireland' and the term 'PSNI'.

(AQW 4077/17-22)

Mrs Long: The PSNI communications review is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the Northern Ireland Policing Board. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice, with calls to the 24hr Domestic and Sexual Abuse helpline having increased by 52% since the start of lockdown, with a 70% increase in the week commencing 20 April, how many of these calls were (i) men; (ii) women; (iii) domestic violence; and (iv) sexual violence.

(AQW 4080/17-22)

Mrs Long: I can advise that since the start of 'lockdown', and up to and including the week commencing 10 May, the percentage of callers and presenting issues can be broken down as follows. 84% of callers were female, 15% were male and less than 1% were transgender. Of these callers a number will have presented with both domestic and sexual abuse issues in the one call, rather than solely one type of issue. Taking account of this for female callers 81% of presenting issues involved domestic abuse, 19% involved sexual abuse. For male callers the relevant figures were 82% and 18%.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether the PSNI is planning to deploy a new uniform, and, if so, how it will differ from the present uniform, including in terms of insignia and branding.

(AQW 4097/17-22)

Mrs Long: The PSNI uniform is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the Northern Ireland Policing Board. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Department for the Economy

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will delay the introduction of reforms to Level 2 of the Training for Success Programme to allow concerns about the (i) timeframe; (ii) lack of consultation; and (iii) the impact on those working in the sector to be addressed.

(AQW 1167/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): In response to the current Covid-19 pandemic and recognising the importance of prioritising remote delivery and support to the existing cohort of participants on the Department's training programmes, I have decided that introduction of our reformed vocational education programmes will be postponed by one year. Delivery of both Skills for Life & Work and the new NI Traineeship will commence in September 2021. My officials will continue to work with all providers to ensure the successful implementation of reforms in 2021.

Subject to normal budget and contractual approvals, the Department intends to take up the final available one year contract extension for Training for Success and the associated Disability Support Service.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she has had sight of the Buglass Review Report in respect of RHI issues; (ii) when it will be published; (iii) whether her Department requested or suggested any changes, amendments, omissions or additions to the report.

(AQW 3293/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Andrew Buglass provided his final report to the Department on 10 March 2020. The Department provided Mr Buglass with feedback on points of accuracy and clarity but did not request amendment to the findings or conclusions included in the report.

The report was published on the Department's website on 29 April 2020, along with an accompanying statement. Both are available at the address below:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/non-domestic-northern-ireland-renewable-heat-incentive-scheme-independent-research-hardship>

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for the Economy when the Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme will open for applications. (AQW 3564/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Processing and Marketing Grant (PMG) Scheme was a scheme that was run by NI's Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). This scheme ended in 2013. Any update on plans to revive the PMG would need to be directed to DAERA.

Small and medium size agri-food companies are eligible to apply for capital support from Invest NI under their Selective Financial Assistance (SFA). Invest NI has also secured EU state aid approval to operate an Agri-Food Investment Scheme (AFIS) for large agri-food processing enterprises. While at this stage no budget has been secured to operate the scheme, Invest NI hopes that the AFIS can open at the beginning of the new financial year, with it running until 31st December 2020.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will engage with employers with the purpose of allowing them to avail of the same contractual sick pay entitlements as employees if asked to self-isolate during the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQW 3758/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Agency Workers Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 give agency workers the right to the same basic employment and working conditions as if they had been recruited directly, after completing a qualifying period of 12 weeks in the same job. This includes the right to statutory sick pay (SSP) but not contractual (occupational) sick pay.

However, employers can and many do choose to go beyond the legal minimum and offer contractual sick pay, and I would encourage them to do so. Contracts are, however, between employers and employees and it is inappropriate for my Department to become directly involved.

If employees have concerns about their employment contracts, they can access advice from the Labour Relations Agency (LRA) or Law Centre NI. The LRA is a sponsored body of my Department and offers free, confidential and impartial advice on all employment issues, and can be contacted via its workplace information service on 03300 555 300. The Law Centre NI provides free, independent, specialist legal advice on employment rights matters. The Law Centre advice line can be contacted on 028 9024 4401 or by email to: employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy how she is working with the Minister for Communities to support workers to claim Income Support rather than being made redundant, which could allow businesses to remain dormant rather than cease trading and allow employees to keep their job. (AQW 3799/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the Coronavirus Jobs Retention Scheme (CJRS) which will cover 80% of workers' wages, if they otherwise would have been redundant due to the crisis. The CJRS is a temporary scheme open to all UK employers starting from 1 March 2020 and it is designed to support employers whose operations have been severely affected by COVID-19. This would provide more support for workers rather than claiming benefits such as Universal Credit.

The Department of Finance (DoF) has been liaising regularly with the Treasury to test and clarify how the CJRS will operate, and most importantly, provide the support that is urgently needed.

I am in contact with the Finance Minister and the Chancellor on any issues relating to the UK-wide schemes and I will continue to work with my Executive colleagues to consider what further support measures can be made available for the economy during the current health and economic crisis.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail how many Business Support Grants have been (i) applied for; and (ii) issued; in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 3943/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As of 1st May 2020, a total of 911 £10,000 Small Business Support Grants have been made to properties in the Lagan Valley Parliamentary Constituency. An additional 338 registrations have been made to the online portal against properties which have not yet been paid. The reasons why payments have not been made include the need to carry out additional eligibility checks. Some claims may be ineligible because the property is vacant, because only one grant can be paid to each business irrespective of how many properties the business occupies, or because the property is not in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief.

For the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant Scheme, information on the number of businesses in the Lagan Valley Parliamentary Constituency that have applied for and received payment, are published in the 'Operation of the scheme by council, constituency and sector' section on the following webpage - <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£25000-retail-hospitality-tourism-and-leisure-grant>.

Based upon applications received, this details applications by decision status (paid/rejected/being processed), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area, Parliamentary Constituency, and supported sector. This data represents the position as of Monday 4th May and will be updated on a regular basis.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy (i) when the current exclusion of the sports sector, in respect of the £10,000 small business grants, will be lifted for the purposes of COVID-19; and (ii) when sports clubs will have access to the £25,000 leisure, tourism and hospitality grants.

(AQW 3950/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The Small Business Support Grant scheme is open to all businesses who are in receipt of Small Business Rates Relief (SBRR) or Industrial Derating and have a Total Net Annual Value of £15,000 or below. The scheme does not specifically exclude the sports sector but it is possible that many in this sector may receive Sport and Recreation Rate Relief rather than SBRR or Industrial Derating, which would subsequently exclude them from the grant scheme. The rating system has been used as a means to quickly identify businesses and to pay grants. At present there are no plans to extend the scheme to cover businesses who receive Sport and Recreation Rate Relief.
- (ii) Sports clubs are eligible for the £25,000 Business Support Grant scheme for the retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors if they have a Total Net Annual Value (NAV) of between £15,001 and £51,000, subject to some exclusions.

Further information on the schemes is available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-your-business>.

The Department for Communities has responsibility for sport. Minister Hargey has announced that sports clubs and sporting organisations from the voluntary and community sector, which are unable to receive support from other Government Covid-19 Mitigation Funds, will be able to apply to Sport NI for a small grant of £2,000 to help with immediate financial commitments to maintain their facilities during the Covid-19 restrictions. More information on this is available at www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-hardship-fund

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy how many North Down businesses that have applied to the (i) Small Business Grant Scheme; and (ii) Hospitality, Tourism and Retail Sectors Grant Scheme, have yet to receive payment.

(AQW 3961/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As at 14th May 2020, a total of 495 Small Business grants of £10,000 have been made for properties in the North Down Parliamentary Constituency and a further 193 applications to the online portal have been received where a grant has not yet been paid.

The reasons why payments have not been made include the need to carry out additional eligibility checks. Some claims may be ineligible because the property is vacant, because only one grant can be paid to each business irrespective of how many properties the business occupies, or because the property is not in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief.

For the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant Scheme, information on the number of businesses in the North Down Parliamentary Constituency that have applied for and received payment, are published in the 'Operation of the scheme by council, constituency and sector' section on the following webpage - <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£25000-retail-hospitality-tourism-and-leisure-grant>.

Based upon applications received, this details applications by decision status (paid/rejected/being processed), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area, Parliamentary Constituency, and supported sector. This data represents the position as of Monday 4th May and will be updated on a regular basis.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the proposed make-up and meeting schedule for the Tourism Recovery Steering Group.

(AQW 3974/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group (TRSG) on 23 April to lead the planning and preparations for the recovery of the Northern Ireland Tourism Industry in response to COVID-19 and prepare for regrowth of the sector.

The inaugural meeting is scheduled for Friday 15th May, followed by a further meeting on Friday 19th June and monthly as required

I chair the TRSG and the membership comprises representation from relevant Government Departments, Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, VisitBritain and the tourism and hospitality representative bodies – NI Tourism Alliance, Hospitality Ulster and NI Hotels Federation.

The Steering Group will report progress on a regular basis to the Executive and the Economy Committee through myself.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, on foot of the Buglass report, does she accept that (i) genuine Renewable Heat Incentive claimants are continuing to suffer significant hardship; (ii) among those suffering the most are claimants who ran their boilers the least and, in consequence, did not recoup much to reduce loans obtained to install their systems; and (iii) her department was wrong to claim hardship would not result from the 2019 tariff.

(AQW 4012/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) I accept that the reduction in cash flow resulting from reduced tariffs has been challenging for some participants.
- (ii) The Buglass report does not contain detailed analysis of the impact of load factor. It is likely that the economic impact of the tariff changes will vary dependent upon individual circumstances.
- (iii) I am unaware of such a claim being made by the Department for the Economy.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether she now accepts that the reduction in the Renewable Heat Incentive tariff has encouraged a return to reliance on fossil fuels, as referenced by the Buglass report.

(AQW 4013/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There has been some recent indication of increasing use of fossil fuels by some RHI participants. The recent and unprecedented decline in oil prices is likely to be a key factor this as oil products have become less expensive.

The Department for the Economy is committed to keeping the variables which underpin the RHI tariffs under review. A consultation is currently ongoing in relation to the independent review carried out by Cornwall Insight. All relevant issues, including recent fuel price volatility, will be considered following closure of the consultation ahead of a recommendation to the Executive.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether the increase in the Renewable Heat Incentive tariff now being discussed would still result in an underspend and, if so, can she quantify same.

(AQW 4015/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Proposed tariffs as per the recent Cornwall Insights Report would result in an underspend of the annual RHI Annually Managed Expenditure (AME) budget.
- (ii) Based on recommended Cornwall tariffs the estimated unutilised AME would be in the region of £24m for the 2020-21 financial year.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy what legislation exists in Northern Ireland to protect the taxpayer from bearing the full cost of decommissioning obsolete energy infrastructure.

(AQW 4040/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department currently has no responsibility for approving or monitoring work to decommission existing energy infrastructure that has become obsolete. These are matters for the authorities who may have granted environmental consents for the original construction.

For onshore development such consents are granted by the relevant district council or Department of Infrastructure by way of a grant of planning approval.

For offshore developments, the Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs grant Marine Licences and the Crown Estate award seabed rights.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy to detail what progress has been or will be made to prioritise improvements to rural broadband access to facilitate home working for rural workers in the Upper Bann constituency.

(AQW 4042/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has developed Project Stratum to utilise £165m available funding to improve internet connectivity for those premises across Northern Ireland currently unable to access broadband services of 30 Mbps or greater.

This is a transformational project which has the potential to positively impact the lives of citizens and the productivity of businesses, by providing the infrastructure to support access to broadband services. The target intervention area consists of just under 79,000 premises, some 97% of which are rural, defined as NISRA Band H – settlements of fewer than 1,000 people or open countryside. Almost 2,700 of these premises are in the Upper Bann Constituency.

Analysis undertaken by the Department and advice from independent advisors, indicates that it is not possible to prioritise specific geographical areas, without potentially sacrificing overall coverage, increasing costs and slowing delivery.

While the precise number and location of premises that will directly benefit will not be known until after contract award, the aspirations of the Department continue to be to maximise broadband coverage from the funding available, and to secure an outcome that closes the broadband connectivity gap that exists in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of the UK.

The closing date for submission of tenders for Project Stratum has now passed. The evaluation of bids is underway, with contract award expected in late September 2020.

The industry has indicated that a 6-9 month period from contract award will be required for design and preparation activities. We do not, therefore, anticipate any deployment of infrastructure until April 2021. Under the terms of the contract to be awarded, full deployment across the target intervention area must be completed by March 2024. This does not account for any unforeseen delays due to the current Covid crisis.

There are a number of other UK Government broadband schemes operating in Northern Ireland and available to both citizens and businesses. These are listed below and links have been provided:

Universal Service Obligation: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/advice-for-consumers/broadband-uso-need-to-know/>

Rural Gigabit Connectivity Scheme: <https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/rural/>.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 3680/17-22, AQW 3536/17-22, AQW 3467/17-22, AQW 2592/17-22 and AQW 2292/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 4048/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: These Assembly Questions have all now been answered.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many of her departmental officials are currently working on preparations for the ending of the transitional arrangements with the European Union in December; (ii) how many officials were working on this six months ago; and (iii) can she provide an assurance that her Department is fully prepared for the end of the transitional arrangements at the end of the year.

(AQW 4058/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My Department has 109.24 FTE (full time equivalent) staff dedicated to EU Exit work, throughout the Department and its ALBs.
- (ii) Six months ago this figure was 107.25 FTE.
- (iii) My Department has been extensively involved in supporting the NI economy through the unprecedented challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, throughout this I have been mindful that the UK Government has stated the transition period will not be extended, thus preparation for this also remains a top priority.

I am disappointed to note that there has been no further clarity from UK Government on how the Protocol will be enacted as well as commitments on unfettered access to the UK internal market. I continue to press the UK Government for urgent clarity.

Whilst the responsibility for enacting the Protocol lies primarily with UK Government, my officials are advancing work to ensure the Department and its Arm's Length Bodies' legislation, policies and services are as prepared as possible for the end of the transition period.

In addition, my officials continue to engage directly with businesses to understand how they may be affected by the Protocol and to consider what measures may be required to support them.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what liaison has there been with persons external to government in respect of battery generation/storage in support of the grid/transmission in Northern Ireland, in the last three years.

(AQW 4115/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy has had a small number of contacts external to government, in the last three years, in respect of battery generation/storage in support of the grid/transmission in Northern Ireland. This contact has been in the form of routine ad hoc queries raised by companies involved in battery storage/generation. In general the contact has been to offer advice in respect of extant government policy.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether any future decisions around tuition fees will be matter for the Executive as a whole.

(AQW 4119/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Any decision to change maximum tuition fee levels for full-time undergraduate Northern Ireland and European Union domiciles studying at publically funded Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions, beyond the annual rate of inflation, would be an Executive decision.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Ms Bailey asked the Assembly Commission how many agency staff were employed by the Assembly on (i) 29 February 2020; and (ii) 1 May 2020; and in which business area they were employed.

(AQW 3997/17-22)

Mrs D Kelly (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): It might be helpful to clarify that the Assembly Commission does not employ agency workers. Instead, agency workers take up placements with the Assembly Commission through a Recruitment Agency. They are employed by that Recruitment Agency.

At 29 February 2020, there were 23 agency worker placements with the Assembly Commission. Table 1 below details the number of agency workers in each Business Area.

At 1 May 2020, there were 34 agency worker placements with the Assembly Commission. Table 2 below details the number of agency workers in each Business Area.

Table 1: Agency Workers as at 29 February 2020

No.	Business Area
1	Business Office/Procedures
8	Committees
1	Communications
3	Finance Office
7	Human Resources Office
1	IS Office
1	Legal Services
1	Official Report
23	

Table 2: Agency Workers as at 1 May 2020

No.	Business Area
1	Business Office/Procedures
1	Corporate Governance
1	Corporate Support Office
8	Committees
1	Communications
7	Finance Office
4	Human Resources Office
1	IS Office
1	Legal Services
4	Official Report
1	Procurement
4	RalSe
34	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 29 May 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what has been the cost to date of the operation of the Independent Reporting Commission; and how much has been paid to each Commission member.
(AQW 615/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Independent Reporting Commission was jointly established by the UK Government and the Irish Government, and is jointly funded by both. We are therefore unable to provide the information requested.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) what action they have taken to define the role specification for the Compact Civic Advisory Panel; and (ii) when the public appointments process to recruit panel members will open.
(AQW 2019/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Work is undergoing to develop a profile of skills and experience that will be sought from applicants for appointment to the Compact Civic Advisory Panel (CCAP).

The public appointments process will be commenced at an appropriate point following the completion of this work.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they are considering responding to paragraph 9 (5) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020).
(AQW 2793/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The impact of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020) is currently being considered.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have carried out a review or assessment of the existing law pertaining to the right to freedom of religion or belief in the workplace in regarding the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020).
(AQW 2794/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The impact of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020) is currently being considered.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, while recognising these are unprecedented times, how they will maintain effective accountability to Members when the Assembly is moving to reduced sittings, oral and topical questions to Ministers are ending, written questions are discouraged and Assembly business will be restricted to Executive business.
(AQW 3863/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Ministers remain accountable to the Assembly and will comply fully with any arrangements the Assembly itself may determine for the conduct of its business.

Ms Dillon asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have considered the request from the Historical Institutional Abuse Interim Advocate to raise the cap on compensation payments to £114,000.
(AQO 368/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The HIA Interim Advocate has withdrawn his proposal to raise the maximum cap on HIA compensation payments.

The Interim Advocate's decision was taken after consultation with the Victims and Survivor Groups. The Groups were clearly of the view that because of the current Covid-19 crisis and in light of the ageing and vulnerable cohort they represent that they wish to proceed with the Redress Scheme as provided for in the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Act 2019.

Ms Ennis asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions have taken place with the British government to ensure commitments in New Decade, New Approach, to implement the Stormont House Agreement within 100 days, are delivered.

(AQO 381/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have had an initial meeting with the Secretary of State. Further meetings will be arranged in the near future, including through the establishment of the Joint Board mentioned in New Decade, New Approach.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) what steps have been taken to appoint a permanent Commissioner for Victims and Survivors of Historical Institutional Childhood Abuse; and (ii) what is the likely timescale on appointment.

(AQW 3918/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The public appointment process for the Commission for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse is under way. The selection panel, which will operate in accordance with the principles and practices of the CPANI Code, has been appointed and the Competition Initiation Meeting has already taken place.

It is anticipated that the Commissioner will be appointed in late summer. The Interim Advocate will continue in his post until then.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the budget for the office of Interim Advocate for Victims/Survivors of Historical Institutional Abuse; and (ii) the spending to date.

(AQW 3919/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The budget for the office of the Interim Advocate for Victims and Survivors of Historical Institutional Abuse for 2019/20 was £107,000.

The spend to 31 March 2020 was £51,788, subject to end of year adjustments.

These figures do not include payroll costs, the budget for which is held centrally.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail which step the following fall under in the plan for emerging from lockdown, subject to safe distancing; (i) ability to return to owner occupied caravans; (ii) ability of guest houses to reopen; (iii) river bank angling; (iv) boat angling; and (v) ability to take foreign holidays.

(AQW 4116/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are committed to the Executive's agreed process of continuous review of the Regulations governing the restrictions which, based on expert medical and scientific advice, are considered necessary in order to slow the spread of Coronavirus, help the health and social care system cope and ultimately to save lives. The Coronavirus Decision Making document, by necessity, provides examples rather than a full list of issues to be addressed. As we proceed through the steps and as restrictions are relaxed, we will seek to clarify the revised measures and how they apply to different businesses, facilities and activities.

We note, in relation to river angling, that the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs recently announced that the public angling estate would gradually be re-opened to local anglers.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with regard to COVID-19, what engagements he has had with the British Government to have legislation included in the Agriculture Bill coming before Parliament on 13 May to (i) protect food standards; and (ii) ensure that imports are of the same standards our farmers have to comply with.

(AQW 4071/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I have made it clear at the Inter-Ministerial Group EFRA, where the UK Government is represented, that high standards must be maintained [in GB]. UK producers must not face unrestricted competition from third country competitors who might benefit from greater levels of direct and indirect support or significantly lower regulatory costs.

It is essential that the UK maintains its position as a safe and reputable source of food. I will continue to impress upon the UK Government the need to protect the integrity of the UK's food industry.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his bid for a £105m support package from the UK Government/EU.

(AQW 4072/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Resource DEL bid for a £105m support package was submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) in March and has since been reviewed and refined. The bid is now classified as a "Marker bid" and a new substantive Support for Farming Sector - Market Intervention Resource DEL Bid of £107.5m was submitted to DoF on 6 May. At its meeting on 18 May, the Executive agreed to allocate £25m for market interventions in the Agri Food Sector.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) how many pollution incidents in the Glenavy River have occurred; (ii) how many of those incidents led to successful prosecutions; and (iii) the levels of fines imposed upon those prosecuted, in the last ten years.

(AQW 4150/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials, in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), carried out a search of their Pollution Incidents Management System (PIMS) for the information that you have requested. The PIMS database holds water pollution data back to 2012. From 1 January 2012 to date there have been 43 confirmed water pollution incidents within the Glenavy River Catchment. To help visualise the area within which these water pollution incidents occurred, a map of the Glenavy River Catchment, is presented at Annex 1.

The NIEA investigations result in the classification of each of these water pollution incidents according to their environmental impact. Of the 43 confirmed water pollution incidents from 2012 to date, two were classified as having a high severity impact, five were classified as having a medium severity impact and 36 were classified as having a low severity impact. The water pollution incidents from 2012-19 are presented in Annex 2 which shows both the source of the pollution and the impact severity.

Water pollution incidents are offences under the Water (NI) Order 1999 and NIEA will normally aim to take formal enforcement against an alleged polluter (in line with the NIEA enforcement policy) for incidents that are of a high or medium severity environmental impact and if a suspected polluter can be identified from investigation.

You will be aware of the recent high severity fish kill earlier this month. I can confirm that the investigation into this incident is still ongoing with a view to presenting a case to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) who in turn will initiate proceedings if they consider that the evidence is sufficient. This was the only confirmed case so far in 2020.

With regard to the other high severity incident and the five medium severity incidents confirmed in the Glenavy River catchment between 2012 and the end of 2019, the enforcement outcomes are detailed below.

The high severity incident that occurred in 2014 led to a major fish kill and as a result of their investigation NIEA prepared a file for the PPS. Following the PPS decision to prosecute, the case was heard in Antrim Magistrate's Court on 25 June 2015. In this case the court imposed a formal caution on the alleged polluter and also directed that the Glenavy Conservation and Angling Club were recompensed by the offender for their losses. The offender accepted the formal caution, thereby accepting responsibility for the incident, and paid £1500 to the club. No fine was levied by the court.

Of the five medium severity water pollution incidents, two of these were linked by location and a formal warning letter, issued under the Water (NI) Order 1999, was issued to the alleged polluter. NIEA costs of £450.04 were recovered from the alleged polluter through that warning letter.

The third medium severity water pollution incident related to an oil spill at a farm in the catchment. This incident was investigated by both NIEA and the PSNI and from those investigations, the discharge was determined to have been as a result of an oil theft by persons unknown. Given the circumstances, no formal enforcement was possible as the farm owner was deemed not to be responsible and the thieves were never identified.

In the case of the fourth medium severity water pollution incident, the industrial company that was alleged to have caused the pollution committed to a very significant capital spend on their site to improve their operations and to minimise the risk of a similar incident recurring. NIEA monitored the site in the subsequent months to ensure that the works were carried out appropriately. As a result no formal enforcement action was taken.

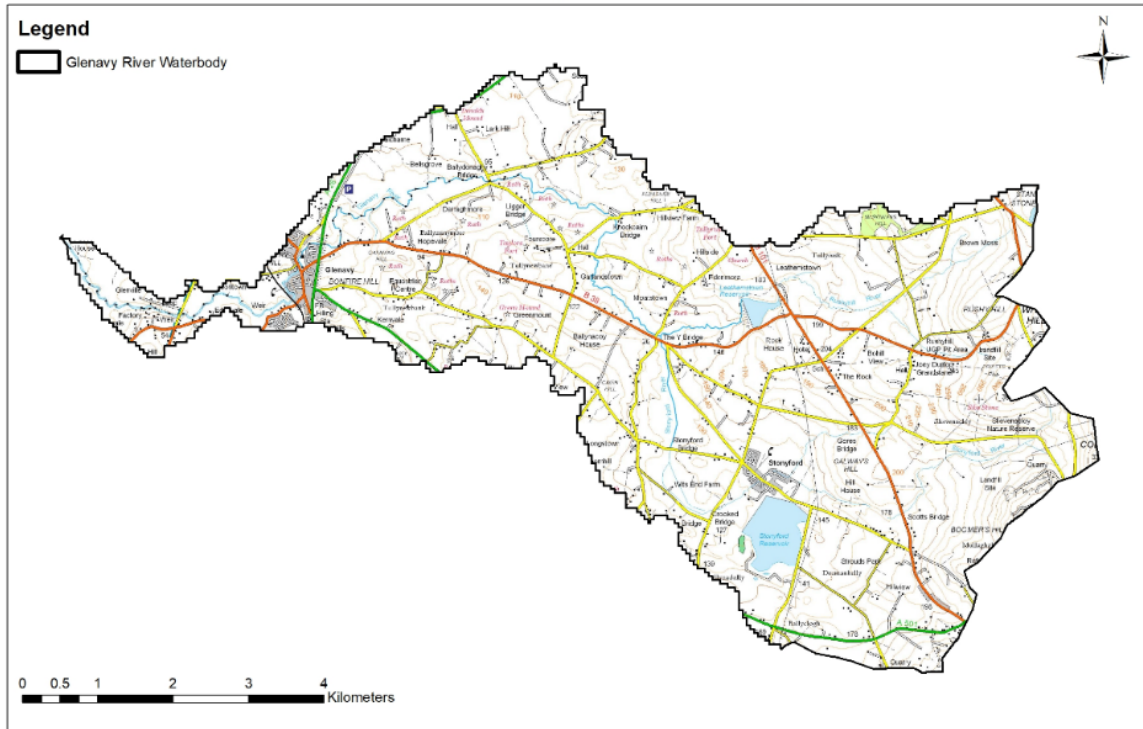
In respect of the fifth medium severity incident, no polluter was identified from investigations, so no formal action could be taken.

As also stated, 36 water pollution incidents in the Glenavy River Catchment were classified as having a low severity environmental impact. These low severity incidents were confirmed, from investigation, to come from discharges related to a range of sources e.g. farms, Northern Ireland Water infrastructure, domestic septic tanks and domestic oil tanks. NIEA does not normally seek to take formal enforcement action in respect of incidents that have a low severity environmental impact. However, all of these low severity incidents were investigated and where required, actions were taken by NIEA to stop any further discharge, mitigate its impact and to minimise the risk of recurrence. In respect of the 36 low severity incidents, no polluter was identified in 15 of the investigations.

I trust you find this information useful, however, please do not hesitate to contact me again should you require anything further.

Annex 1: Glenavy

Glenavy River Water body (UKGBN1NB030308208)



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River Catchment (46 km²)

Annex 2: Glenavy River Catchment – Water Pollution Incidents 2012 – 2019 (Source/Severity)

Source	Severity	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Farm	High			1					
	Medium	1			2	1			
	Low	1	2	2	2	3		3	1
NIWL	High								
	Medium								
	Low	1		1		3			
Industry	High								
	Medium						1		
	Low					1	1		
Other	High								
	Medium								
	Low			2	1		1	1	
Domestic	High								
	Medium								
	Low	2	1		1			1	2
Other	High								
	Medium								
	Low								

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the £105m bid to the Department of Finance for farming and animal welfare issues.

(AQW 4159/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Resource DEL bid for a £105m support package was submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) in March and has since been reviewed and refined. The bid is now classified as a "Marker bid" and a new substantive Support for Farming Sector - Market Intervention Resource DEL Bid of £107.5m was submitted to DoF on 6 May. At its meeting on 18 May 2020, the Executive agreed to allocate £25m Resource DEL for market interventions in the Agri Food Sector.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment on a survey conducted by Rural Community Network, Cookstown, that highlights key issues including that 26% of respondents said that the lockdown was threatening the future financial viability of their organisation .

(AQW 4178/17-22)

Mr Poots: I understand that the information you refer to came from a Rural Community Network (RCN) membership survey. Unfortunately, the concerns raised are not unique to rural groups or indeed the voluntary and community sector at this time but I am hopeful that the DfC Charities support scheme will assist those organisations under immediate threat of closure. In response to Covid 19, DAERA officials host a weekly meeting with the six Rural Supports Networks that cover all of Rural NI and represent over 1,500 organisations. The Networks are reporting that those organisations are responding well to the current challenges and are not facing financial viability pressures at this time and we will monitor the situation going forward.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to (i) AQW 3169/17-22; and (ii) AQW 3292/17-22, in light of his assurance in regard to frictionless trade to and from GB when he stated that he has no intention of facilitating infrastructure at Northern Ireland ports, whether he can provide an undertaking that his Department will not facilitate any extension of such infrastructure at Northern Ireland's ports, such as indicated by Rt Hon Michael Gove MP on 20 May 2020.

(AQW 4228/17-22)

Mr Poots: I will be examining the proposals in the UK Government's Command Paper published on 20 May 2020 very closely and I am taking time to reflect on their implications. To be clear, the implementation of the Protocol is not just a matter for UKG and clearly the NI Executive needs to take a view on this. There are also processes of engagement with the EU through the Joint and Specialised Committees that need to be followed through.

I have made the point previously that any frictions in trade between GB and Northern Ireland would be unacceptable, leading to higher prices, additional costs to agri-food businesses and reduced choice for our consumers.

Department of Education

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many staff are employed within his Department's information service; (ii) of these, how many are classed as press officers; and (iii) the annual cost of this service.

(AQW 3535/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): There are eight staff employed in the Department of Education's Press Office. Five of these are classed as press officers; one is currently employed on a temporary basis to cover the long-term sickness of another. Based on the salary cost for April 2020, the annual cost of the Press Office is £324,861.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill 2019-21 regarding school uniform.

(AQW 3735/17-22)

Mr Weir: Whilst this Bill only extends to England and Wales, my Department recognises that the cost of school uniforms can place a substantial financial burden on families particularly in the current economic climate.

Therefore the Department published Guidance on the School Uniform Policy in 2011 and further revised this in June 2018 and issued to all schools. The guidance places an emphasis on keeping costs to a minimum and ensuring value for money and that items are available from a number of retail outlets. A link to the Guidance can be found at:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018>

In addition, school uniform grants make a significant contribution to assisting families with low incomes. From 2009 to 2014 the eligibility criteria were widened to include those most in need in the primary sector and then on a phased basis to low income families on Working Tax Credit.

My Department is committed to providing school uniform grants to families most in need and has delivered funding of approximately £5.3 million per annum and will await with interest the progress of the Bill in Westminster.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education whether there are there plans in place, or being developed, to help supply and temporary teachers who will not have an income if schools are closed due to COVID-19.

(AQW 3741/17-22)

Mr Weir: The issue of funding for substitute teachers, who are unable to work and therefore unable to be paid, is one that my Department has been working hard to resolve.

I am pleased to confirm that this situation has now been resolved and that I have introduced an income support scheme for substitute teachers on 19 May 2020. All details are available on the Department's website at the following link: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/income-support-scheme-substitute-teachers>

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Education what consideration his Department has given to ending the requirement of a Certificate in Religious Education to teach in the Maintained Sector, which is not required in all other school sectors.

(AQW 3778/17-22)

Mr Weir: CCMS regard the Teachers' Certificate in Religious Education as a reasonable and objective, job-related professional qualification. The course is designed to enhance a teacher's understanding of the nature and purpose of faith based education, better enabling him/her to work in an environment which has at its core, the distinct philosophy of Catholic/faith based education provision.

As I have previously stated, I am committed to delivering equality for all school sectors, and this includes consideration of an end to the Article 71 Exception of the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 (FETO). However, FETO is the legislative responsibility of The Executive Office and therefore any amendments to the legislation would be a matter for them to address.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education when AQW 3535/17-22 will be answered,

(AQW 4051/17-22)

Mr Weir: AQW 3535/17-22 has now been answered.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether any restrictions are placed upon the Education Authority at present in terms of advancing a Principal employed within a Grade 2 Primary School to a L22 Salary Grade.

(AQW 4198/17-22)

Mr Weir: A Principal's salary is determined based on the leadership group pay spine and the corresponding salary range for the Principal Group to which the school is assigned. Boards of Governors of each school are required to set an Individual School Range (ISR) based on the appropriate school principal group. The Principal's salary must be within the ISR. For convenience, I have included a link to the Leadership Group Pay Structure – Circular 2006/17, which provides guidance on setting the ISR para 7.1-7.12:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/circular-2006-17-leadership-group-pay-structure-from-1-september-2005.pdf>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education what assessment has been made by his Department and its arm's length bodies to ensure primary and post-primary schools are ready for return following the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically around (i) personal protective equipment; (ii) social distancing; and (iii) hot water for hand washing.

(AQW 4245/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has established the Education Restart Programme to ensure that the education system is able to restart in a safe and effective manner when conditions allow.

The Programme has identified the following priorities at this stage:

- **Physical Protection** - We will support, protect and enable our workforce as they lead the return to "new normal" education arrangements – protecting learners also.
- **Well-being** - We will focus on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of the education workforce and learners as they return to education.
- **Special Educational Needs Services** - We will ensure continuity of vital services to vulnerable learners, including Special Education Needs (SEN) services.
- **Standards and Learning** - To maintain (or re-dress) educational standards acknowledging the period of time learners have experienced outside of the normal classroom environment and to provide continuity of learning during a "new normal" scenario.
- **A New Normal** - We will consider and implement "new school day" arrangements, considering practical arrangements in schools relating to transport, school meals, class sizes, daily routines, curriculum delivery and extracurricular activities. To be co-designed with practitioners and stakeholders.
- **Funding** - We will monitor the impact of the pandemic, school disruption and education restart on school budgets and advise on required remedial action.

Work has commenced on each of these work areas – this will involve cross-organisational working, stakeholder engagement, research into best practice and design of new delivery models / policies / guidance.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he will amend legislation surrounding children's school attendance, in order to ensure those with vulnerable family members are not required to send children to school.

(AQW 4246/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have no plans to change legislation in this regard.

We know from a large body of educational research that the best place for children, particularly vulnerable children is school. Whether that is physically at school or remote learning from home.

It is vital that all children continue to develop their skills and knowledge, maintain contact with their teachers and highlight any particular issues or concerns both now and when schools open again.

The policy on pupil attendance can be adjusted as needed within the confines of current legislation and this would be a more appropriate way to deal with the problem.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education when his Department will resume area planning and associated development proposals decisions.

(AQW 4294/17-22)

Mr Weir: The area planning process and associated publication of Development Proposals requires significant engagement with key stakeholders and sufficient time to allow for full and meaningful consultation. In the current climate the focus of all stakeholders, including managing authorities, bodies representing sectoral interests, schools and parents, is management of the COVID-19 response. This has required extensive deployment of resource, which also has to be applied towards arrangements for safe reopening of schools. My Department continues to review those Development Proposals published prior to the decision to stand down area planning and, where appropriate, has extended deadlines for responses in support or against such proposals. I have no current timetable for resumption of area planning the COVID-19 response and development of plans for reopening of schools remain a priority. In a small number of cases, the statutory objection period for representations to the Department in respect of published Development Proposals had expired prior to the decision to pause area planning activity. Where appropriate my officials will bring recommendations on these proposals for my consideration.

Department of Finance

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Finance, since his previous confirmation during a statement to the Assembly on 31 March 2020 that an order had been jointly placed, whether he has made any progress in procuring personal protection equipment in conjunction with the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 4143/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I refer you to my answer to AQW 3914/17-22 and to the Official Report of my evidence session to the Committee for Finance on 8th April 2020, which can be found using the below link:

<http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-22043.pdf>

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the information provided pursuant to AQW 3941/17-22.

(AQW 4144/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Based on the most up to date published information, the best NISRA estimate of deaths occurring certified as COVID-19 without positive tests is 192 at week ending Friday 15th May 2020 (including those registered up to and including 20th May 2020). This figure is based on the differencing of two key but unlinked sources and therefore may be subject to some error.

The NISRA publishes weekly death statistics. These include the number of COVID-19 related deaths, identified by any mention of COVID-19 on the death certificate. They include suspect and probable cases. Published NISRA figures show that 664 deaths involving COVID-19 had occurred by 15th May 2020 (including those registered up to and including 20th May 2020).

The Department of Health (DoH) reported 472 deaths at that date. DoH receive these data from Trusts which are based on deaths occurring within 28 days of a positive test for COVID-19 whether or not the cause of death was COVID-19.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of deaths in March and April 2019 compared with March and April 2020.

(AQW 4155/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Monthly published statistics from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) are available at <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/monthly-deaths>. These show that the provisional number of deaths for March and April 2019 were 1,345 and 1,354 respectively; and for March and April 2020 the numbers were 1,380 and 1,933.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether he will provide additional capital funding to the Department of Infrastructure to address the NI Water infrastructure deficit, help facilitate the City deals for Belfast and Derry and to prepare for economic recovery.

(AQW 4170/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department for Infrastructure was allocated £558.2 million of capital funding in the Executive's 2020-21 Budget as approved by the Assembly on 5th May 2020.

It is for the Infrastructure Minister to decide on the allocation of this Budget according to her capital investment priorities across her department.

Future funding will be considered by the Executive as part of its considerations for the Budget for 2021-22 and beyond.

The Executive has committed to providing match funding for City and Growth Deals. Funding for agreed City Deals projects will be provided to the relevant department in line with agreed spending profiles. Budget 2020-21 included an allocation to DfI for initial work on the Newry Southern Relief Road, subject to business case approval.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance when the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency will release a breakdown of the age profile of total deaths during the period from the week ending 30 March to the week ending 1 May.

(AQW 4252/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency routinely publish weekly deaths statistics, for each week ending on a Friday. These are available at <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/weekly-deaths>. The tables show the provisional number of all deaths by age group from week ending Friday 10th January 2020 to Friday 15th May.

Department of Health

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what changes he intends to bring forward concerning the inspection of dental practices, with a view to bringing practice in line with the rest of the UK.

(AQW 1111/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): My Department is reviewing The Regulation and Improvement Authority (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005, these regulations set the minimum frequency for statutory inspections.

My Department is also reviewing the Health and Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and considering the principles behind, and the approach to, regulation itself.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the geographical spread of COVID-19 testing to date.

(AQW 3962/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is available on the Department of Health Covid-19 statistics dashboard.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health whether the 12-week shielding period for people at the highest clinical risk of COVID-19 will be extended.

(AQW 4105/17-22)

Mr Swann: The advice on shielding remains current, anyone advised to shield by their GP or hospital specialist should continue to do so until advised otherwise. Senior officials from my Department are working at a national level to develop the future of the shielding programme. This work will carefully consider the need to protect people who are extremely vulnerable, against the latest evidence of the risk posed by Covid-19.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will extend the present 12 week COVID-19 shielding period advised for people at the highest clinical risk.

(AQW 4111/17-22)

Mr Swann: The advice on shielding remains current, anyone advised to shield by their GP or hospital specialist should continue to do so until advised otherwise. Senior officials from my Department are working at a national level to develop the future of the shielding programme. This work will carefully consider the need to protect people who are extremely vulnerable, against the latest evidence of the risk posed by Covid-19.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given, as part of the recovery plan, to people who are in receipt of a COVID-19 shielding letter that is due to come to an end in 6 weeks.

(AQW 4128/17-22)

Mr Swann: The advice on shielding remains current, anyone advised to shield by their GP or hospital specialist should continue to do so until advised otherwise. Senior officials from my Department are working at a national level to develop the

future of the shielding programme. This work will carefully consider the need to protect people who are extremely vulnerable, against the latest evidence of the risk posed by Covid-19.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has considered plans to introduce public health passenger locator forms to assist with the contact tracing for people arriving at ports and airports.

(AQW 4135/17-22)

Mr Swann: Work is underway to require people arriving in NI from outside of the common travel area to provide contact information on or before arrival to assist with contact tracing.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider making temporary changes to self-directed payments rules during the COVID-19 crisis to allow family members within the same household to be employed as carers; and to relax restrictions in what counts as care for purchases and services.

(AQW 4148/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department are currently considering providing further guidance on self directed payments.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health, in light of the loss of many hospice fundraising and retail income streams, and the expenditure incurred due to operating in the COVID-19 pandemic, (i) when hospices will receive their share of the recently announced £6.75m in Executive funding; and (ii) whether he plans to provide any additional finance to hospices in the months ahead, over and above those monies already announced.

(AQW 4156/17-22)

Mr Swann: I welcome the additional funding that has been made available to support hospices in Northern Ireland in recognition of the difficulties arising from the loss of funding from donations and revenues from retail outlets. Arrangements are currently being made to allow the allocation of this funding to be made to hospices as quickly as possible.

In recognition of the challenges facing hospices during the COVID-19 pandemic, measures have also been put in place to contribute to the financial stability of hospice cash-flow to ensure that they can continue to offer this vital care as sustainable service providers at this challenging time.

My Department is facing a challenging financial outlook. Following confirmation of the 2020/21 Budget, my Department has an estimated Resource funding shortfall to maintain its existing services and is facing significant risks of non-delivery of savings targets. Any decisions on funding for hospices will have to be made within this context.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the adequacy of flu vaccine supplies; and to outline the plans for the roll-out of the vaccination this year.

(AQW 4166/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency has ordered the influenza vaccines required to vaccinate those who will be eligible to receive a flu vaccine as part of the 2020/21 flu vaccination programme. The vaccines are expected to be delivered into Northern Ireland from around August/September.

It is envisaged that the flu vaccination programme will begin in the autumn as usual. However, due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the vaccination arrangements in schools and GP practices may need to be slightly different to take account of issues such as the numbers of pupils in schools and social distancing measures that may still be required at that stage.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health how many patients who tested positive for COVID-19 have been treated and discharged from Altnagelvin Hospital.

(AQW 4169/17-22)

Mr Swann: As at 9:42am on 22nd May 2020, there were 93 patients admitted to Altnagelvin Hospital who tested positive for COVID-19, 75 of these had been discharged, 13 died and 5 remained as inpatients.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health what support has been given during the COVID-19 lockdown to contact parents who normally only have access to their children at Child Contact Centres.

(AQW 4177/17-22)

Mr Swann: Child Contact Centre services are currently suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However Child Contact Centre Co-Ordinators and Staff are continuing to maintain contact with and between parents. They are also endeavouring to use technology, such as video conferencing, to continue to provide contact sessions between children and their non-resident parent where it is possible to do so.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to facilitate pharmacy teams to work at the frontline, maintaining the supply of medicines and advice to patients over the coming months.

(AQW 4186/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department continues to engage positively with representatives from Community Pharmacy NI in delivering support to community pharmacy contractors and their staff during the current Covid-19 pandemic. To date community pharmacies have played an essential role in maintaining the supply of medicines and advice to patients. Consideration is now being given as to how community pharmacy can effectively continue to respond to the current needs, as well as making preparations for provision of pharmacy services in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health for an update on the review of the use of seclusion and restraint and development of departmental policy guidance.

(AQW 4203/17-22)

Mr Swann: The review of the use of seclusion and restraint is action 6.5 of the Health Mental Health Action Plan I published on 19 May which is available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/mental-health-action-plan>

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Community Crisis Intervention Service in Derry following its evaluation earlier this year.

(AQW 4204/17-22)

Mr Swann: This pilot is led by Derry and Strabane District Council and decisions on its future reside with the Council. The Department participated in a recent multi-agency meeting to establish if future provision of the service is viable. The Protect Life 2 budget is already fully committed and there are a wide range of projects already requiring funding under the Strategy. The Department is facing a funding shortfall to maintain its existing services in addition to the need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project is funded until June 2020. A workstream is being established under the Protect Life 2 Strategy to consider options around future provision of this type of service.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health whether the Chief Medical Officer has received any notifications that an abortion in Northern Ireland has been performed since March 31 2020.

(AQW 4213/17-22)

Mr Swann: Yes. The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 (and the earlier Regulations) require a notification of termination to be sent to the Chief Medical Officer within 14 days of a termination.

129 notifications have been received to date (22 May 2020).

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how anyone presenting with an urgent need for surgical abortion in Northern Ireland can access these services.

(AQW 4217/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has made it clear to medical professionals that abortion is now legal and they should assess on a case by case basis whether a woman's individual circumstances meet the grounds for a termination of pregnancy. This would include surgical abortion where this is clinically necessary.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether all testing centres are fully operational and testing to capacity; and whether rigorous testing at these sites will continue as the lockdown restrictions ease.

(AQW 4222/17-22)

Mr Swann: Three testing centres have operated to date in Northern Ireland under the National Testing Programme, these are: Belfast (SSE Arena), Derry/Londonderry (City of Derry Rugby Club), and Craigavon (Craigavon MOT centre). A fourth drive-through test centre has now opened in Enniskillen on the 28 May which will add to this capacity.

Testing capacity at these centres is flexible and is informed by the number of bookings made on the digital platform in the preceding 48 hours. If demand for testing increases, as recorded on the digital platform, testing capacity can be extended to meet the demand. Testing as part of the National Initiative will continue to be a vital tool in our response to this Covid-19.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health when his Department will reopen addiction inpatient units in Health and Social Care Trusts; and whether there are plans to reintroduce community pharmacy-supervised consumption of opioid substitution treatment.

(AQW 4231/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board is currently working with the Northern, Western and South Eastern Trusts on the reopening of the regional addiction in-patient units as part of plans to rebuild Health & Social Care services in a phased approach post peak of the pandemic.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed to enable reopening of these units. These include the reconfiguration of ward accommodation to comply with social distancing measures; the reduction of pressures elsewhere in mental health services that would allow staff redeployed during the peak of the pandemic to return to their substantive posts; and comprehensive infection control procedures for staff and the protection of patients who are likely to be immunocompromised

due to the impact of substance misuse. It is likely that reopening will be phased, and full reopening is unlikely to be achieved until the risk of infection spread is substantially reduced.

A review is also underway with community pharmacists to recommence supervised consumption of opioid substitution treatment, again contingent on their being released from the additional work they undertook to deal with COVID-19 pressures. It should be noted that the Trust-based Community Addictions Services continue to supervise high risk patients directly, and have absorbed the treatment of people stabilised / low risk that were formally availing of the service from community pharmacies.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what co-production and co-design took place with local community and voluntary organisations in the formulation of the mental health action plan; and what groups were contacted and involved in this process.

(AQW 4232/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Mental Health Action Plan was formulated using themes identified in a Strategic Insight Lab held on 12 and 13 November 2018. A number of community and voluntary organisations took part, including Voypic, Aware, Inspire, Mindwise, Cause and Action Mental Health.

The plan was further developed in a series of workshops in late February/early March 2019 with Inspire, Mindwise, Cause, Action Mental Health, Eating Disorders NI and CLARE CIC in attendance. In addition a number of persons from some smaller community and voluntary groups attended these workshops in a personal capacity.

Further, the Department asked Inspire, Action Mental Health and the Patient Client Council to facilitate an additional round of workshops in October 2019 focusing on the community and voluntary sector, including people with lived experience.

A Project Board delivered strategic oversight throughout the process, membership of which included Action Mental Health as the community and voluntary sector representative.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health, in light of the standing down of the Nightingale Hospital in Belfast, to outline the timetable for the recommissioning of (i) Paediatric Services at Daisy Hill Hospital; (ii) the Regional Cystic Fibrosis at Belfast City Hospital; (iii) the Emergency Department at Daisy Hill Hospital; (iv) Loane House at South Tyrone Area Hospital, Dungannon; and (v) Cardiology Services at Daisy Hill Hospital.

(AQW 4237/17-22)

Mr Swann: In parallel with continuing to manage this crisis, I can confirm that significant work is underway to rebuild our health and social care system in the wake of the first COVID-19 surge. Our immediate focus in the coming weeks will be on stepping up any urgent services which were paused as we prepared for that surge.

The following are the arrangements in place for the services requested and the current position on the safe and sustainable re-engagement of services:

- (i) A 24 hour, seven day week Paediatric Ambulatory Service has continued to operate in Daisy Hill Hospital. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) is undertaking a risk assessment to facilitate the re-opening of some paediatric inpatient beds.
- (ii) The Regional Adult Cystic Fibrosis in-patient facility is operational at Belfast City Hospital. The out-patient facility is operational one day per week for urgent cases.

Regional Cystic Fibrosis services have a helpline service available and are piloting virtual clinics and home IV antibiotics to give patients a safe variety of assessment and treatment options. Any patients that require admission in other hospitals are reviewed daily. The Cystic Fibrosis consultant on-call service continues to operate 24/7.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is undertaking a risk assessment to look at how services can be safely restarted.
- (iii) The Emergency Department at Daisy Hill Hospital (DHH) has been temporarily closed as part of the response to COVID-19. The SHSCT is developing options for a re-introduction of emergency care and these will be shared with the Pathfinder Group in the next few weeks.
- (iv) The day hospital in Loane House, South Tyrone Hospital is currently being used as a Community COVID-19 centre. The need for primary care COVID-19 centres remains. A regional project board oversees the operation of COVID-19 centres and my Department is working closely with them to monitor the number and location of centres, as well as the way in which they operate.
- (v) In-patient cardiology beds at DHH have moved to Craigavon Area Hospital as part of the temporary closure of the Emergency Department. All other cardiology services have remained available in DHH.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether accessible arrangements for requests of personal protective equipment supplies from Health and Social Care Trusts are in place for outside bodies, including charities, providing face-to-face support such as in addiction and homeless services.

(AQW 4249/17-22)

Mr Swann: Health and Social Care Trusts have accessible arrangements in place to ensure personal protective equipment is available to all health and social care workers undertaking their professional duties. This includes all contracted independent partners, which includes charities and addictions services, where the provider requires PPE to undertake their health and social care duties.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the dates each planning application for battery generation/storage in support of the grid/transmission in Northern Ireland was (i) validated; and (ii) approved, in the last three years.

(AQW 4078/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Please find details below as requested –

Application reference	Location		(i) Validated	(ii) Approved
LA05/2019/0675/F	Lands to the southeast of No. 1 Lisnabreeny Road East Belfast BT6 9SS	Proposed battery energy storage facility, associated electricity substation/transformer compound, alterations to existing access (for construction traffic) and associated ancillary development/ site works	21 Jun 2019	29 Apr 2020
LA03/2018/0984/F Appeal 2018/A0248	Lands at Doagh Road Kells (approximately 137m North East of Kells Sub-Station and approximately 56m South West of 3 Whappstown Road)	Proposed battery energy storage facility, new site access, lighting and CCTV columns and ancillary development	25 Oct 2018	27 Nov 2019 on appeal
LA08/2018/0851/F	Lands at Portadown Road Tandragee (immediately adjacent to NIE sub station and approx. 100m South East of No. 87 Portadown Road).	Proposed battery energy storage system, new access lane, lighting and CCTV columns and ancillary development.	18 Jun 2018	21 Sep 2018
LA10/2018/1589/F	South of Classic Marble (Showers) Ltd 31 Garvaghy Bridge Road Garvaghy Dungannon County Tyrone BT70 2EW	An energy storage facility consisting of: a. A Battery Storage Compound, surrounded by Palisade Fencing and gates, containing: up to 8 No. containers housing the battery units; up to 16 No. external HVAC equipment and associated ducting on the containers; up to 16 No. Inverter Stations; MV Collection Switchgear; Aux. Power Transformer; Aux. Power Distribution Unit; b. An Electrical Substation Compound, surrounded by Palisade Fencing and gates, Containing: Electrical substation building; parking; up to 500kV substation transformer; c. Rainwater Harvesting Area d. Temporary Contractors Compound; e. Site access track and other associated infrastructure f. Site to be surrounded by Deer Fencing, CCTV and gates	18 Dec 2018	03 Sep 2019

Application reference	Location		(i) Validated	(ii) Approved
LA09/2018/0803/F	Lands approximately 150m North of 60 Drumkee Road Coalisland Dungannon	Proposed battery energy storage system, new access lane and ancillary development	11 Jun 2018	08 Oct 2018

More information on these applications can be found on the Planning Portal at www.planningni.gov.uk or by contacting the relevant local planning authority.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what guidance or direction was issued in respect of the series of planning applications for battery generation/storage in support of the grid/transmission in Northern Ireland, in the last three years. (AQW 4095/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Current regional planning policy for assessing such development proposals is as set out in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) which was published September 2015, together with supporting supplementary planning guidance. There has been no additional guidance or direction issued in respect of battery generation/storage.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what liaison was there with (a) the Department for the Economy; or (b) other departments in respect of battery generation/storage in support of the grid/transmission in Northern Ireland and planning applications in regard to same, in the last three years.

(AQW 4096/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has not dealt with any planning applications for battery generation/storage in the last three years. However, my officials have been in liaison with Department for Economy (DfE) officials generally over the past two to three years regarding renewable energy planning policy and DfE work on a new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland. There has been no liaison with other Departments on this issue.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide a timetable of legislation that she is intending to bring forward. (AQW 4100/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure I have already introduced a number of pieces of legislation in response to the current COVID-19 pandemic that will address issues faced by the public during these challenging times. For example, I have changed the legislation to ensure that taxi licences expiring during the current emergency are automatically renewed, without the need for prior testing. I have also made Regulations to temporarily suspend the requirement to hold a public event as part of the planning pre-application community consultation process for major planning applications and in examining legislative options in respect of planning permission given the challenge posed by COVID 19. In recent days I have also introduced secondary legislation for electrically assisted pedal cycles (E-bikes) to bring their use in line with the Republic of Ireland and GB.

To ensure the ongoing financial assistance required by our Ports at this time, and indeed going forward is met, I am proposing to introduce primary legislative amendments which will increase the amount of funding available to them.

Additionally there are a number of areas where I plan to bring forward legislation, including provision to increase the penalties for using a mobile phone when driving. I am also reviewing current policy in a number of other areas, which may ultimately lead to legislative change. These include drink driving and also potentially vehicle testing arrangements. Once statutory responsibility for the Reservoirs Act (NI) 2015 is transferred to my Department from DAERA I will be considering the secondary legislation required to implement the reservoir safety policy envisaged in that legislation.

I am also currently considering bringing forward changes to subordinate planning legislation across a number of issues including Regulations setting out the terms of a review of the implementation of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and amendments to permitted development rights.

Due to the regulatory nature of the work of my Department, particularly in relation to transport and vehicle licensing, there will always be a need for regulatory change to address changing circumstances and this will also generate additional requirements going forward.

As we start to move from the current crisis in relation to COVID-19, I will add further to this list as I identify new opportunities to make improvements to legislation for the benefits of our people and our communities.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what liaison there was with persons external to government in respect of (i) battery generation/storage in support of the grid/transmission in Northern Ireland; and (ii) planning applications in regard to same, in the last three years.

(AQW 4112/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has not dealt with any planning applications for battery generation/storage in the last three years. However, correspondence was received regarding a planning appeal relating to a planning application for a proposed Battery Energy Storage Facility at Doagh Road, Kells which was determined by Antrim Newtownabbey Council (appeal reference 2018/A0248).

I am not aware of any other liaison with persons external to government in relation to this issue.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the granting of planning permission for a wind turbine at Knock Iveagh, (i) for her assessment of the decision, with specific reference to the site's historic and archaeological importance; (ii) for her assessment of the decision in relation to the findings of her Department's Waringstown Report; and (iii) whether her Department needs to review its planning process in relation to heritage sites.

(AQW 4122/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Development at Knock Iveagh remains under consideration by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. Whilst these processes are ongoing, it would not be appropriate for me to offer an assessment of the decision either with specific reference to the site's historic and archaeological importance, or with reference to the findings of the Waringstown Report. To do so could either influence or prejudice the outcome of the Council's deliberations.

My Department will continue to monitor and review all aspects of the planning system in Northern Ireland, including in relation to heritage sites, to ensure that it operates effectively and I will make appropriate changes and enhancements as required. There are no current plans for any changes regarding heritage sites.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why Rural Community Transport Partnerships were issued an interim letter of offer of three months; and (ii) how she will address the funding concerns currently facing Rural Community Transport Partnerships.

(AQW 4158/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i). My officials have issued Interim Letters of Offer to Community Transport Operators for the Quarter 1 period of 2020/21 to help alleviate the cash flow issues they are experiencing as a result of their reduced income during this COVID 19 response period.
- (ii). I recognise the important role of Community Transport Operators not least in rural communities. I have already taken a number of steps to support them during this period which has included confirming a letter of offer for 2020/21 will issue once budgets are agreed, authorising the early release of 2019/20 retentions, and along with Minister Poots, continued payment of Assisted Rural Travel Scheme funding. The period ahead will continue to be challenging, however I remain committed to working collaboratively and innovatively in an effort to support and help ensure the long term viability of these organisations.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the (i) budget; and (ii) outcomes for (a) Active School Travel; and (b) Safe Routes to School, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4164/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Active School Travel Programme (ASTP) is co-funded by my Department and the Public Health Agency and delivered by Sustrans NI. Each organisation provides £200,000 annually making a yearly budget £400,000. If available the PHA will contribute a further £50,000 annually for the purchase of promotional resources linked to walking and cycling.

The table below shows the budget expenditure over the last three financial years: (please note that the higher figure for 16/17 year is due to an overlap with the original a new contracts to facilitate the finalisation of the pilot programme.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
	£525k	£450k	£450k

The Active School Travel Programme is a three year programme for each school joining the programme. The contract provides for a target showing the percentage increase, year on year in the number of children travelling to school by active travel means in participating schools.

The table below shows the target and percentage increase for each level / year of the programme for each of the last three financial years at each level.

	2016/17		2017/18		2018/2019	
	Target	Achieved	Target	Achieved	Target	Achieved
Level 1	26%	33%	26%	32%	26%	47%
Level 2	28%	36%	28%	19%	28%	37%
Level 3	30%	15%	30%	23%	30%	62%

Under the Safer Routes to School programme there have been 25 projects completed in the last three years. The Safer Routes to School programme, funding for the last three years is provided below.

2017/2018	£69,400
2018/2019	£113,000
2019/2020	£63,000

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what legislation permits private car park operators to enforce outstanding Car Park Charge Notices (PCNs) on privately-owned land.

(AQW 4175/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has no responsibility for private car park operators operating private car parks on privately owned land. I can, however advise that there is no legislation which sets out the terms and conditions for Private car parks. Parking in such car parks is governed by the Terms and Conditions set out on signage at each specific site. These should include the conditions under which a motorist is authorised to park (e.g. parking tariff), and the penalty if these conditions are not met.

The Consumer Protection Team of the Northern Ireland Consumer Council, can offer advice and assistance on any matter concerning private car parks.

Department of Justice

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice when will courts, through video links or otherwise, be able to deal with the backlog of cases arising from refusal of separated parents to permit the other parent to exercise their access rights during the COVID-19 crisis.

(AQW 4125/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The Lord Chief Justice has approved guidance for court users during the COVID-19 lockdown, this can be found at <https://judiciaryni.uk/coronavirus-covid-19>.

The guidance highlights that where a party to the proceedings feels a matter of contact is urgent they may request a hearing by lodging the requisite form. On receipt of the form the judge will determine whether the matter is urgent or necessary and if it can be dealt with administratively or will require a hearing. Where the judge determines a hearing is required the parties will be notified of the arrangements, date and time.

Listing is a judicial function; the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service will facilitate arrangements where a judge determines that a case should be listed for hearing. Where the judge determines a matter cannot be progressed at this stage, the matter will be adjourned to a fixed date determined by the judge for future review.

These arrangements will be kept under review and will be revisited as circumstances develop.

Department for the Economy

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has approved the business case, and the necessary resource allocations, to enable the Magee Graduate Entry Medical School to open next year; and to outline the reasons for her position.

(AQW 3980/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Ulster University submitted a business case for a Graduate Entry Medical School at their Magee Campus to the Department of Health, however the issues associated with this extend across a number of Departments, including Health, Economy and Finance.

The Executive has therefore agreed that The Executive Office will now take the lead on progressing the Graduate Entry Medical School.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions she has had with universities regarding tuition fees having been paid by students for services that weren't delivered; and whether students will still be liable for payment.

(AQW 4142/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for setting the annual maximum tuition fee level that can be charged by higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, based on the Executive decision taken in 2011, it is the decision of a higher education institution in determining what tuition fee levels they wish to charge Northern Ireland domiciled and EU domiciled students up to that maximum level. This includes any decision regarding whether a student should receive a partial refund of this fee.

However, as you can appreciate, every higher education institution in Northern Ireland has had to close and move teaching and learning provision online in response to the UK-wide lockdown required to prevent and control the spread of Covid-19. The local institutions have provided assurances to my Department that provision is in place to support all students during this pandemic.

For any student who believes that the quality of the provision they have received from their institution is not satisfactory, the student should contact their institution directly.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether it is possible to quantify the amount of furloughing funds that are being paid within Northern Ireland.

(AQW 4225/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: DoF does not currently have access to this information. The Treasury has indicated that it will be provided once available.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 5 June 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition will relate to the cultural issues included in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 941/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): We had asked for the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition to conclude its work by 10 April. However the ability of the Commission to meet this deadline has been impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. We will consider the report on receipt.

Miss McIlveen asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many staff car parking spaces their Department and its agencies have in Belfast city centre; and whether they are taking any action to reduce this number.
(AQW 1644/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office and its Arm's Length Bodies currently have 67 staff car parking spaces in Belfast city centre. Of these, staff are charged for the use of 16 spaces. There has been a reduction of 29 spaces since 2016/17 and the requirement for car parking spaces remains under regular review.

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made under New Decade, New Approach on the establishment of the Ad Hoc Assembly Committee to consider the creation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, including the appointment of the panel of five experts.
(AQO 57/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Arrangements for the establishment of Ad Hoc Committees are a matter for the Assembly.

Our officials are currently considering the process for the appointment of the panel of experts.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline to what extent any member of the Equality Commission has actively been involved in politics.
(AQW 2330/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: None of the current Commissioners to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland have undertaken any significant political activity in the last 5 years.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail a breakdown of the costs produced to the Committee for the Executive Office in respect of (i) the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression; (ii) the Irish Language Commissioner; and (iii) the further Commissioner associated with Ulster Scots.
(AQW 2675/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The costs produced to the Committee represent an initial marker bid submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) to inform budget considerations for 2020/21. They are a very high level estimate based on costs of existing bodies headed by a Commissioner. The estimates will be subject to change and actual allocations to each body will be dependent on final decisions by Ministers, the Executive and the Assembly on their functions and responsibilities.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will engage with the (i) Equality Commission; and (ii) the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on the contents of Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020).
(AQW 2791/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The impact of Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020) is currently being considered; this will include engagement with the Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission as appropriate.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they are considering responding to paragraph 9 (4) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020).
(AQW 2792/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The impact of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020) is currently being considered.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the future of the Executive Office in Brussels.
(AQW 3291/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Brussels office works in partnership with all Executive departments and plays an important role in supporting Northern Ireland's engagement, and ensuring our interests are effectively represented, with the EU, its institutions and with countries, regions and organisations across Europe. The work of the Brussels office will develop and represent the Executive and work to secure its policy objectives in light of Brexit.

Mr Gildernew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had with the Irish government to manage the spread COVID-19.
(AQO 380/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Accompanied by the Minister for Health and the Chief Medical Officer, we met the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, and the Irish Minister for Health and Chief Medical Officer on 14 March. We also spoke to them on 31 March and 14 April, along with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

This is part of ongoing close co-operation to tackle the pandemic.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the list of businesses published by them, unlike the Scottish Government list, does not go beyond essential businesses to include scope for businesses to remain open if they can operate in a way which is fully consistent with social distancing advice.
(AQW 3892/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: This was an initial list which has subsequently been reviewed. We would refer you to the publication on 22 April by the Minister for the Economy of an advisory list of priority sectors and to her accompanying statement which advised that any company which can work within the social distancing guidelines should do so.

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQO 114/17-22, and given the approaching deadline for a recruitment process, whether they will provide an update on the recruitment plans for the position of Attorney General.
(AQW 3996/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Attorney General's term of appointment will expire on 30 June 2020.

We are currently looking at options to address the matter to ensure continuity in maintaining the responsibilities and statutory functions of the Attorney General and his office.

We will provide an update to the Assembly in due course.

Mr O'Dowd asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their Department's plans to update the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 to take into account concerns of migrant workers in the context of the withdrawal from the European Union.
(AQO 122/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Racial Equality Strategy runs from 2015-2025 and there are currently no plans to update it.

Whilst immigration policy is a reserved matter, the Executive Office continues to work with the Home Office in London to facilitate and support the implementation of the European Union Settlement Scheme here.

We continue to stress to the Home Office the importance of ensuring that all European Economic Area (EEA) and Swiss citizens resident here are made aware of the need to apply for immigration status which they will require to remain here after the UK has left the European Union.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) at what stage of the Executive's Coronavirus recovery strategy can country sports, such as angling, resume; and (ii) whether he plans to publish guidance on this issue. (AQW 4151/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I reopened the Public Angling Estate on 18 June. Angling can resume, so long as social distancing can be maintained and that there is no shared contact with hard surfaces.

I have issued guidance for anglers on the NI Direct websites. Guidance on other country sports does not fall under my remit.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will consider reinstating a borehole grant. (AQW 4194/17-22)

Mr Poots: The 2012-2014 Rural Borewell Scheme was a successful collaborative project delivered by the then DARD in partnership with the Department for Regional Development as policy lead. The Scheme provided a grant towards installation of a 'borewell' to provide a wholesome water supply for domestic dwellings, built prior to 1 Jan 2000, and not served by mains water. The scheme was discontinued after year three when a review concluded that demand had been met. There is no evidence to suggest that this position has changed but I will consider and discuss with other stakeholder departments, if a need is identified, following consultation on a Rural Policy Framework for NI later this year.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to bring forward a fair farm gate prices bill during this mandate. (AQW 4199/17-22)

Mr Poots: I will not be pursuing farm gate price legislation because it is unrealistic and highly damaging to the interests of the Northern Ireland Agri-Food sector. It would require minimum prices to be set, presumably based on adding a fixed margin to the cost of production. This risks making our goods uncompetitive and creating reduced demand. It is not a feasible way to increase farm incomes and I do not believe that this type of legislation has any place in our economy.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the climate emergency motion passed by the Assembly on 3 February 2020, for an update on progress to establish an independent environmental protection agency based on models of good practice. (AQW 4257/17-22)

Mr Poots: I believe that good environmental governance is about focusing on environmental outcomes and taking a strategic approach to the environmental challenges that we face here in Northern Ireland and on the global stage.

Subject to obtaining the relevant consent of the Assembly, the provisions of the UK Environment Bill giving effect to an Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) will extend to Northern Ireland and in due course I plan to issue a discussion document to gauge stakeholder views on how we should deal with environmental plans, principles and governance in the future. The OEP will be independent from Government and able to scrutinise and advise on environmental policy, investigate complaints and take enforcement action against public authorities.

I have committed to considering the implications of the proposals in the New Decade, New Approach agreement for the establishment of an independent environment agency to form part of the possible outline of a future Programme for Government but an independent environmental protection agency cannot be created overnight – consideration needs to be given to appropriate options and these will all require robust economic appraisal to determine the best option for Northern Ireland. It is no small task to scope all of the potential impacts, including significant legislative, financial and human resource issues, which would be necessary before decisions can be made.

Understandably, in the current crisis resources are spread more thinly than I would like and so some prioritisation has been necessary. There are other issues that need to be addressed first, such as the OEP and Northern Ireland's first overarching Environment Strategy, which will help in our recovery from the devastating effects of Covid-19.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether he intends to bring forward legislation in areas where Environment Bill provisions do not extend to Northern Ireland, such as biodiversity gain and environmental targets; and (ii) if so, how he intends to do this. (AQW 4258/17-22)

Mr Poots: The UK Environment Bill was developed at a time when the local devolved institutions were not operating. As a result, it was not possible to extend certain provisions to Northern Ireland, while in other cases extension was not appropriate due to those provisions being England-specific.

The Bill's environmental targets, for example, are very closely tied to the aims and objectives of the UK Government's 25-year plan for the environment, which largely applies to England only. If statutory Northern Ireland targets are to be considered they should also relate to a long-term strategy for the environment, in this case Northern Ireland's first overarching Environment

Strategy, which is currently under development and aims to help deliver the sustainable green economic growth that we and the public expect.

I believe that existing environmental legislation and the prospective Northern Ireland provisions of the Environment Bill provide a sound basis for environmental protection and enhancement in the future. I will be considering the need for additional legislative measures and discussing that potential need with my Executive colleagues, particularly where there are cross-cutting policy responsibilities, such as biodiversity gain, which is inextricably linked to the planning regime.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures are in place, or planned for the future, to review levels of fines and other penalties for those found responsible for river pollution.

(AQW 4262/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has no current plans to review the levels of fines and other penalties for those found responsible for river pollution.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on the ongoing work at the Roe Valley Country Park; and (ii) whether discussions have taken place with local landowners.

(AQW 4303/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- 1) Works are ongoing to upgrade the East Bank pathway, upstream of the main visitor centre area, these works were stopped in late March 2020 as a consequence of Covid-19 restrictions. Those works recommenced the week beginning 1st June 2020 and are scheduled for completion within 3 weeks. As part of those works a section of adjacent fencing was temporarily moved back, to facilitate machinery access, with the neighbouring landowner's agreement. On completion of the works the fence line will be re-instated.
- 2) As the result of a landslide following flash flooding in May 2014 a section of upper and lower riverside pathway were damaged on the West Bank downstream of the visitor centre area in the area known locally as the Bull Hole. Whilst works have been completed in the past year to reinstate public access to the lower riverside pathway, informal discussions have taken place with the adjacent landowner with regards potential access options to undertake works that would allow the re-instatement of safe public access to the upper pathway should funding become available.
- 3) Discussions are undertaken with local landowners in relation to works projects as necessary, this being in consultation with both Land and Properties Services and the Departmental Solicitor's office as may be required. Where appropriate, legal discussions are conducted through landowners' solicitors and the Departmental Solicitor's Office.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 51589/2011-16, (i) for an update on the infraction proceedings initiated by the European Commission against the United Kingdom in respect of the management of Northern Ireland's Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas; and (ii) what impact Brexit will have on these proceedings.

(AQW 4305/17-22)

Mr Poots: Legal proceedings by way of a "Letter of Formal Notice" were instigated against the United Kingdom in May 2015 in relation to Special Areas of Conservation under the Habitats Directive This is the first stage in the infraction process. Since May 2015 no further legal action has been taken by the Commission against the UK Government on this specific legal case.

As the court proceedings were instigated prior to Brexit, it remains as a live legal case. It is a matter for the European Commission to determine how they wish to handle this case.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what role (i) his Department; and (ii) the Northern Ireland Environment Agency would have in any considerations by the Strategic Investment Board on residual waste infrastructure requirements.

(AQW 4344/17-22)

Mr Poots: In 2018 the Department commissioned the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to carry out an analysis of residual waste tonnage in Northern Ireland by 2030 and provide an assessment of residual waste infrastructure requirements to help inform decision makers as to the residual waste treatment capacity required to be operational by 2030. The forecast period to be reported on was later extended to 2035 to align with time frames within the EU Circular Economy Package.

As the waste regulator for Northern Ireland, NIEA receives waste data from a number of sources such as site returns data from permitted and licenced waste facilities, councils waste returns data and data relating to the movement of certain wastes. The SIB used information from this data collection for analysis and to inform considerations by the SIB on residual and other waste infrastructure requirements.

SIB completed their report, 'Analysis of NI Residual Waste arisings to 2035', at the end of 2019. As waste arisings closely align with economic activity discussions on updating the report to factor in the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have taken place between DAERA and SIB.

This report will assist in my consideration of the strategic and long-term needs for residual waste infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail cattle movements (i) to marts; and (ii) from farm to farm; broken down by month between January and June 2020, and by Divisional Veterinary Office area. **(AQW 4393/17-22)**

Mr Poots: My officials in Veterinary Service Animal Health Group (VSAHG) carried out a search of the Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS) for the information that you have requested.

In each of the months from January to May of the year 2020 the number of cattle movements from farm to marts and from farm to farm were as laid out in the attached table by Divisional Veterinary Office (DVO) area, based on the DVO area of the holding from which the movement originated.

Cattle Movements from Farm to Marts

	Armagh	Ballymena	Coleraine	Dun-gannon	Ennis-killen	Mallusk	Strabane	Newry	New-townards	Omagh
January	2,406	2,537	3,658	3,849	6,073	3,240	1,848	3,178	1,237	3,872
February	3,393	2,315	3,895	4,482	6,118	2,811	1,774	3,985	1,419	4,472
March	3,013	2,077	3,613	3,075	5,251	2,285	1,696	3,568	1,346	3,850
April	177	81	328	451	1,041	144	269	198	134	488
May*	2,712	2,696	3,994	3,695	4,382	2,787	1,799	4,197	1,648	4,357

Cattle Movements from Farm to Farm

	Armagh	Ballymena	Coleraine	Dun-gannon	Ennis-killen	Mallusk	Strabane	Newry	New-townards	Omagh
January	1,591	1,657	2,334	1,642	1,195	1,376	1,304	2,457	1,773	1,718
February	1,266	1,600	2,433	1,261	1,520	966	1,101	2,721	1,931	1,563
March	2,108	1,721	2,039	1,799	1,522	1,194	1,208	2,919	2,406	1,623
April	2,903	1,434	2,652	3,110	2,995	1,800	1,679	3,799	3,617	3,243
May*	3,438	1,772	3,114	2,040	2,768	2,026	1,233	3,255	3,122	2,830

* Please note that a number of farm to farm moves for the last 2 weeks of May will not be included in these figures due to movements that have not yet been notified to DAERA.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, due to the risk to public health with excessive numbers of people visiting areas without toilet facilities, whether he would consider reopening the public toilet facilities at (i) Crawfordsburn Country Park; and (ii) Helen's Bay. **(AQW 4441/17-22)**

Mr Poots: It is of concern that following recent relaxations of restrictions so many people have acted in a socially and environmentally irresponsible manner whilst visiting our great outdoors. It is understandable that people want to get out and enjoy the fine weather but many have ignored advice to plan ahead, check what facilities were available before travelling and to be sensible about how far they travel and how long they stay.

As I previously announced, facilities within DAERA Country Parks are being reopened in a phased basis starting with car parks. We are actively considering options and are currently engaged with appointed contractors, to ensure public toilet facilities in our Country Parks, such as those at Crawfordsburn Country Park and Helens Bay, can be reopened and serviced in a manner which can be considered appropriately safe, however I cannot commit to a precise opening date at this time.

Department of Education

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of children who hold a statement of special educational needs; (ii) the number of hours recommended in those statements; and (iii) the number of hours actually provided. **(AQW 3142/17-22)**

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):

- (i) The October 2019 Northern Ireland School Census data shows that 19,208 children hold a statement of special educational needs.
- (ii) & (iii) The information requested is not held centrally within the Education Authority (EA), and accurate details of the total allocation of support to schools cannot be provided at this time as the mechanism for recording the allocation of adult assistance is individual to each legacy Education and Library Board. However, work is ongoing in the EA to progress a regionally agreed process to ensure accurate and consistent records of this data are held centrally.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether the Education Authority has adequate access to hand sanitizer supplies for schools.

(AQW 3736/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can confirm that the Education Authority currently has sufficient stock of hand sanitiser to supply schools which are currently open. The Authority is responsible for ensuring the procurement and delivery of PPE and cleaning products to all schools and has established a single Procurement Distribution Centre in order to secure the supply chain of these products. The Authority is confident that this arrangement will ensure that sufficient supplies of PPE and cleaning products are available to meet schools' needs.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure children and young people on the at risk register are being provided with support through the COVID-19 programme Eat Well, Live Well; and to outline the budget and operation of the programme.

(AQW 4255/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Eat Well, Live Well (EWLW) Programme is being delivered by the Education Authority Youth Service and is contributing towards the Department for Communities Voluntary and Community Sector Covid-19 Response Programme. EWLW has funding to provide healthy meals for 3,100 vulnerable young people who remain at risk of going hungry, despite Free School Meal direct payments being made to parents/carers. The EWLW Programme is currently operating at maximum capacity.

Funding of £366k is available for a period of 11 weeks until 30 June with each young person receiving a weekly food box containing provision for 5 breakfasts and 5 lunches to cover the normal Monday to Friday school week. Food boxes are assembled at four main sites (Hammer Youth Centre, Belfast; Longtower Youth Centre, Derry; Taghnaven Community and Youth Centre Lurgan; and Ballykeel Youth Centre Ballymena) and then distributed via 44 youth centres by EA Youth Service staff and drivers.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education what is the legal definition of a Grammar school.

(AQW 4266/17-22)

Mr Weir: The legal definition of a grammar school is set out in Article 2 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (as amended by Schedule 9 to the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989). It defines a grammar school as a secondary school which:

- a) immediately before the coming into operation of the 1989 Order was a school in which fees were charged or could have been charged in respect of pupils admitted to the school, or a school which replaces such a school or schools; or
- b) is established after the coming into operation of that Article and is designated by the Department as a grammar school.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education what guidance has been given to schools with reference to homeschooling of those with a statement of special educational needs during COVID-19.

(AQW 4270/17-22)

Mr Weir: Each individual child with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) has their own needs, so approaches need to be tailored to the individual pupil by their teacher working in conjunction with the school's SEN Co-ordinator (SENCo).

The Continuity of Learning Project (COLP), initiated by the Department and co-ordinated by the Education Authority (EA), provides an opportunity for practitioners, school leaders and education support organisations to work together, to produce and disseminate high quality support and guidance for teachers, parents and learners, in order to provide for the emotional health, resilience and wellbeing of learners and to facilitate progression in learning, through these challenging times.

A range of methods to share and signpost resources and guidance is available for teachers and school leaders, such as C2K which includes information produced by ETI to support pupils with SEN <https://www.eti.gov.uk/news/special-schools-remote-learning>. Further information about how and where to access this support will be provided in the near future. Resources to support parents are also available through specially developed pages on the EA website at <https://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-learning>

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education what assurances he can give that every child's education is being looked at and supported at the present time, not just those who are preparing to take the transfer test.

(AQW 4279/17-22)

Mr Weir: First of all I want to pay tribute to the school leaders, teachers and support workers, youth workers and other education partners who continue to do an excellent job in supporting all our children and young people and their families.

School leaders and class teachers have a central role in monitoring the effectiveness of distance learning for all children and young people within the context that they are currently working in. There are numerous examples where schools have adapted their practice to support ongoing learning and this continues to evolve with many developing a blended approach of using online and hard copy resources. Providing a sense of purpose and daily routine is also important not least to support mental health and wellbeing. There is, however, no expectation that distance learning can replicate completely learning experiences in and beyond the classroom.

Young people will, therefore, have different experiences while learning at home and there may be many reasons for this including variability in the ability of parents, for example busy key workers, to support their children with their learning. That is why my Department continues to signpost parents to resources, to help them provide this support. These resources can be accessed on the Education Authority's website under "Supporting Learning" and are being added to regularly.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to provide (i) an update on the review of the Extended Schools Programme, (ii) an update on funding levels for 2020/21; and (iii) to advise of any other plans for the programme.

(AQW 4343/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) A review of the Extended Schools programme was undertaken by my Department working closely with colleagues in the Education Authority. I have decided to progress to a public consultation exercise on proposals to replace Extended Schools with a new 'Partners in Education' programme. It is my intention that this will be taken forward at an appropriate time during the 2020/21 academic year, depending on developments around Covid-19.
- (ii) I am pleased that I have been able to maintain the 2020/21 Extended Schools budget at the same level as last year (£9.153m). This will continue to provide additional financial support to almost 490 schools serving the most disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland.

Eligibility for the Extended Schools programme is assessed each year, but because of the demands arising from Covid-19, I have decided that schools participating in the programme last year (2019/20) will continue to receive the same rate of funding this year. This will ensure that no school will see a significant reduction in funding in 2020/21 and allow for continuity of this vital provision for disadvantaged children and their families.

- (iii) Currently, I have no further plans to change the programme in addition to the consultation discussed above. However, I am currently considering the Terms of Reference for the Expert Group required under New Decade, New Approach. The Group will examine and propose an Action Plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys. This will present an important opportunity to consider what more can be done to further support disadvantaged pupils which could potentially lead to further changes to the existing Extended Schools programme.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the major capital build application submitted by St. Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel, in September 2019 and when a decision will be made on this application.

(AQW 4440/17-22)

Mr Weir: Assessment of all applications lodged under the latest call for major capital works is ongoing by Department Officials.

Following completion of the assessment process I hope to be in a position to make a Major Capital Works Programme announcement within the coming months.

Until the announcement is made I am unable to comment further on the application submitted by St Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel.

Department of Finance

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance to detail unemployment figures since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 4216/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Labour Force Survey provides the official estimate of unemployment.

The most recent estimates available are for the period January-March 2020 and are provided in the following table.

Table 1: Estimated number of unemployed people aged 16 years and over, in each constituency

Parliamentary Constituency	Estimated number of unemployed people aged 16 and over
Belfast East	2,000
Belfast North	2,000
Belfast South	1,000
Belfast West	*
East Antrim	1,000
East Londonderry	1,000
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	1,000
Foyle	1,000
Lagan Valley	*
Mid Ulster	1,000
Newry and Armagh	1,000
North Antrim	2,000
North Down	1,000
South Antrim	*
South Down	2,000
Strangford	2,000
Upper Bann	1,000
West Tyrone	1,000
Total	21,000

Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS), January – March 2020.

Shaded estimates are based on a small sample size. This may result in less precise estimates, which should be used with caution.

Unshaded estimates are based on a larger sample size. While this is likely to result in estimates of higher precision, they are still subject to some sampling variability.

*Estimates based on a cell count of less than 3 respondents are suppressed for disclosure reasons.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance how many businesses in the hospitality, retail and tourism sectors have a Net Annual Value of £15,000.

(AQW 4301/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services (LPS) does not hold data by sector in order to answer this question definitively. However, LPS estimates that between 50 and 55 properties which appear to operate in the hospitality, retail and tourism sectors have a Net Annual Value of £15,000 either in the 7th Valuation List which expired on 31 March 2020 or the 8th Valuation List which came in to force on 1 April 2020, or both.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the establishment of a fiscal council, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 4375/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials had begun work earlier in the year in examining the options for establishing a Fiscal Council that will deliver on the commitment as set out in New Decade New Approach.

This included learning from the experience of the other Fiscal Councils in place across Britain, the south of Ireland and further afield, and considering what the Council's terms of reference might be, and how members could be appointed.

Work in this regard however has not progressed as intended as the Department has had to focus on the immediate COVID-19 response. I remain committed to establishing a Fiscal Council and my officials will be refocussing on this commitment once the demand for resources to tackle COVID-19 eases.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance for a breakdown of the funding received from Westminster Barnett Consequentials for COVID-19 related funds.

(AQW 4398/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The following table sets out the breakdown of the Barnett Consequentials for COVID-19.

Barnett Consequentials of England Only Measures	£million
Budget20 LA hardship fund	16.4
Business support grants (total cost)	406.9
Business rates reliefs (total cost)	353.2
Charity support - National Lottery Community Fund	10.2
Charity support - direct grants (inc hospices)	8.5
Fisheries Support	0.2
Rugby League Support	0.4
Coronavirus Emergency Response fund	
Enhanced NHS discharge/suspension of means test	42.6
Local Authority COVID support package	52.4
Purchasing independent sector capacity	45.2
Shielding - food packages	6.9
Shielding - DHSC elements	9.6
DfT - Emergency Management Agreements	95.0
PPE procurement	3.3
DWP additional funding for operational resilience	4.7
Call centre for the National Shielding Centre	1.8
NHS Workforce	48.6
GP and Community Pharmacy Easter Bank Holiday Opening	2.9
Emergency Management Agreement for railway services (19-20)	19.3
Advance Ticket Refund	1.0
Voucher scheme to replace free school meals	7.1
Shielding - food packages	1.9
Councils	52.4
Care Home Support	19.7
Grant Funding for MIND	0.2
Death in Service Payments	0.8
Transport for London	35.9
Total	1,246.9

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the financial pressures facing each Department.

(AQW 4419/17-22)

Mr Murphy: All departments are currently undertaking an assessment of the pressures they face, and the resultant budget requirements, as part of the June Monitoring Round and a separate but related COVID 19 re-prioritisation exercise.

The Executive will consider all departmental assessments as part of the June Monitoring Round and I will bring the outcome of both those exercises to the Assembly in due course.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance to detail the process of funding allocations made to Departments in relation to COVID-19.

(AQW 4420/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive made decisions on COVID-19 funding allocations in line with the Executive's priorities of protecting the vulnerable, supporting businesses and ensuring the continuation of key services.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance what checks and review processes have been put in place by his Department to ensure that there is no double counting or double allocation of public funds.

(AQW 4421/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My department sets out a range of guidance on the management of public funds. It is for individual Accounting Officers to ensure that public funds are utilised in a way that is consistent with those guidelines and uphold the standards of regularity, propriety and value for money.

In addition, all departments have internal audit functions which assist them in the assessment of public spending.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance whether a budget line has been created to support the Mental Health Action Plan; and what amount of funding he has allocated in the budget for this purpose.

(AQW 4439/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of Budget 2020-21 the Executive provided DoH with £10 million to replace the mental health funding commitment that was set out in the Confidence and Supply Agreement.

As part of New Decade New Approach, the British Government has made available £4m in 2020/21 to address unique circumstances here and the document stated that this could include areas such as additional funding to support mental health. This £4m is held centrally.

In addition to its baseline DoH was provided with a general allocation of £140.7 million which can be allocated in line with the Health Minister's priorities. It is for the Minister to set out the extent to which a Mental Health Action Plan has been prioritised with the DoH Budget.

Department of Health

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how the 'R' number is impacted by the spread of COVID-19 in care homes; and, if events in care homes are excluded, what is the 'R' number.

(AQW 4114/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The reproduction number R can be determined in a number of ways. The COVID-19 modelling group has relied principally on data for Intensive Care Unit occupancy and hospital admissions. It is not currently possible to exclude patients admitted to hospital from care homes from these figures. However, patients admitted from care homes constitute a small proportion of hospital admissions and critical care admissions.

Therefore, the situation in nursing homes has limited impact on the estimates of the R value calculated for Northern Ireland. It is likely that R would be slightly lower than current values if it was possible to exclude patients admitted from care homes, but that the value would be within current confidence intervals.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the status of the Gender Identification Service pathway review, including specifically reference to (i) the composition of the Service User Group; and (ii) details and status of the proposed associated Advisory Group.

(AQW 4250/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Gender Identity Pathway Review was temporarily paused to enable the health service to focus on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Work is currently underway to agree a plan to restart the review.

The Gender Identity Review Group comprises representatives of the Health and Social Care Board, my Department, service users, clinicians, General Practitioners, the Belfast Trust, Public Health Agency and the Patient and Client Council. The service users work in the transgender rights community and voluntary sector.

A plan for continuing engagement with the wider voluntary and community sector will be a focus of the restart plan for this work, including the establishment of a service user liaison panel. This panel will facilitate further service user input to the review group.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to delay the Open Call for funding applications to the Core Grant Programme 2021-22, given the time lost by charities and voluntary organisations, in relation to project planning and development, while they reconfigured their services during this pandemic.

(AQW 4251/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health currently has no plans to delay the introduction of the Open Call for applications for core grant to voluntary and community sector organisations in 2021/22. However, this will be kept under review.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to outline the current case definition that is used to identify suspected cases of COVID-19, including any recent changes to this definition, along with the date of such a change.

(AQW 4260/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current case definition that is used to identify suspected cases of COVID-19 is when an individual develops a new continuous cough or fever or a loss or changed sense of normal smell or taste (anosmia). The Change to the definition was publicly announced in a statement made by the 4 UK CMO's on 18 May 2020.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered publishing bespoke guidance for carers who are accompanying people with a disability, or people who lack mental capacity, in hospital during the COVID-19 crisis.

(AQW 4267/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health is aware of, and values the essential role carers play in the lives of people with disabilities including, in some cases, their contribution when those they care for require hospital care. While the existing guidance makes provision for these circumstances, my officials regularly consider updating and enhancing that guidance.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health to outline his Department's policy to testing within care homes; and whether he plans to have a rolling testing programme of continual testing of staff and residents.

(AQW 4281/17-22)

Mr Swann: On Monday 18 May, I announced that the COVID-19 testing programme for care homes was to be further extended and made available to all residents and staff across Northern Ireland; this includes the testing of residents and staff in care homes which, do not and have not had, a COVID-19 outbreak.

The significant programme to test all care home residents is due to be completed during June 2020.

My Department is also, as a priority, assessing current and emerging scientific evidence to inform a rolling programme of COVID-19 testing for staff working in care homes in Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health (i) how many additional doctors are required to address the current shortfall within hospitals in each Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) how many additional doctors are required to address the shortfall within GP practices in each Trust area; and (iii) how much each Trust paid in locum costs in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 4307/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) The most up to date medical vacancy statistics in each HSC Trust are as at 31 December 2019 and are as follows:

Medical vacancies actively being recruited to at 31 December 2019

Medical grade	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	NIAS	Total
Consultant	34	19	1	19	10	0	83
Locum Consultant	9	1	0	0	5	0	15
Associate Specialist / Staff Grade / Specialty Doctor	16	25	0	14	8	0	63
Doctors in training (core trainees, specialty registrars, foundation doctors)	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
Other Doctor	13	0	0	2	0	0	15
Total	72	45	3	37	23	0	180

(ii) General Practitioners (GPs) are independent contractors who contract with the Health and Social Care Board to provide primary medical services to their patients. As independent contractors, GPs are responsible for identifying and recruiting the number of GPs and other staff required to deliver those services.

A GP Medical Workforce Review led by the Public Health Agency was published in June 2015. In line with the recommendations of that Workforce Review, the number of GP training places that the Department seeks to commission annually has been increased by 71%, from 65 in 2015 to 111 as of 2019.

(iii) Full validated information for the last three financial years is in the following table (2019/20 financial year is not yet available).

Medical and Dental Agency Spend 2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/19

Financial year	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	NIAS	Total Spend
2016/17	£18,479,870	£12,321,220	£8,707,389	£11,907,956	£17,238,467	£0	£68,654,902
2017/18	£18,789,536	£16,404,945	£8,920,233	£12,785,008	£16,554,429	£0	£73,454,151
2018/19	£22,430,062	£17,503,264	£10,636,954	£15,511,952	£20,656,870	£0	£86,739,102

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether his Department plans to implement a dual diagnosis service to treat people with a mental health problem and addiction, given the issues highlighted in the recent spotlight programme covering mental health, addiction issues and the impact of COVID-19.

(AQW 4350/17-22)

Mr Swann: Work has commenced to plan service recovery for addiction services across Northern Ireland. As part of the recovery planning process, HSC Trusts will look at how they can improve the care offered to patients with co-occurring mental and alcohol/drug issues across the full range of existing treatment settings.

A process is currently underway to develop a successor substance misuse strategy and so, at a wider regional level, the future configuration of addiction services will be reviewed in tandem with this strategy. This will involve looking at the potential for innovative solutions around dual diagnosis.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether the period covered by the COVID-19 shielding letters will be extended for a further period or whether new ones will be issued.

(AQW 4438/17-22)

Mr Swann: The advice on shielding remains current, anyone advised to shield by their GP or hospital specialist should continue to do so until advised otherwise.

As announced on 1 June, from Monday 8 June, provided the rate of Covid-19 infection allows, those who are shielding will be able to spend time outside with people from their own household or a person from another household whilst ensuring social distancing is observed.

Looking ahead, the UK's four Chief Medical Officers are leading work at a national level to carefully assess what needs to be done to continue to protect people who are extremely vulnerable, against the latest evidence of the risk posed by Covid-19. This will include consideration of the future of the shielding scheme. You will appreciate that this is a process which must be led by the most up to date scientific and medical evidence.

As soon as any decision on the future of the shielding scheme is made guidance will be communicated quickly to those affected.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) why Individual Vehicle Approval (IVA) has not been re-continuing despite new processes being in place in Great Britain since 27 April 2020; and (ii) the number of vehicles awaiting IVA which are to be used by emergency services or key workers in (a) Health and Social Care Trusts; (b) other vehicles to transport patients; (c) PSNI; (d) NI Fire Service; (e) food refrigeration; and (f) other food transportation.

(AQW 4120/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): On 24 March 2020 I took the decision to suspend all vehicle testing until 22 June 2020 to protect staff and customers and delay the spread of Covid-19. I am conscious that this has caused significant disruption for some customers who use our services, including those who require an Individual Vehicle Approval (IVA) test and cannot avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate.

Given the impact that the suspension of testing has had on business, and the delivery of essential services, I am pleased to confirm that from 1 June, the Driver and Vehicle Agency will reinstate IVA testing safely. The provision of IVA tests will initially be prioritised for emergency service vehicles and those used to provide essential services in direct response to the Covid 19 crisis. This will ensure that supply chains and the health service continue to be supported during this time of significant challenge.

Detailed advice and guidance, including how to apply, is now available on the nidirect website at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/individual-vehicle-approval-iva>

Based on applications received, the DVA estimates there are approximately 150 vehicles that require an IVA test. However, the DVA does not hold information on the intended purpose of vehicles requiring an IVA test.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether her Department accepts the position expressed by the NIEA at paragraph 56 of the Public Services Ombudsman Investigation Report 17453; and (ii) for her assessment on whether there is a conflict between planning conditions 1 and 2 and the approved drawings for planning permission A/2008/0408/F.

(AQW 4153/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) report 17453 is focussed on the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's complaint handling process and record keeping. While the complaint relates to a historic planning application on the River Faughan (A/2008/0408/F) the report specifically states that "Historical planning and legal matters in relation to the planning application are outside the scope of the investigation".

This application was subject to a previous judicial review, as well as being the basis of a complaint to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee in relation to public participation in environmental decision making. The Committee has yet to deliver its findings.

I understand this case has been fully explored in the judicial review; nonetheless, before I come to any view on this matter, I have asked my officials to seek legal advice.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the 2020/21 cycling budget.

(AQW 4165/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am continuing to work towards finalising the various budgets within my Department, including a budget for walking and cycling.

I am fully committed to providing funding for investments that encourage active travel, making increased levels of walking and cycling the new normal in our cities and communities to improve lives and positively impact climate change.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the British Government's recent commitments to ensuring infrastructure at ports of entry, and given your responsibility for policy development and regulatory oversight of the activities of trust ports, to outline what engagement she has had with port operators at (i) Larne; (ii) Belfast; and (iii) Warrenpoint, in order to ensure the full implementation of the Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement.

(AQW 4172/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has no responsibility for checks and inspections at ports. My officials have worked closely and continuously with all the main commercial sea ports in preparing for EU Exit, particularly in terms of contingency planning and providing support in preparing for a range of changes that may be required. Discussions regarding inspection-related changes that may be required are led by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and it is through these that any precise infrastructure will be established. My Department will support this work and will continue to engage as required.

I have recently written to Executive colleagues to emphasise the importance of ensuring that we work collectively to ensure that the Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement is fully implemented and to seek their support in doing so.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an updated timeframe for the beginning and completion of Phase 3 of the regional transport hub in Derry.

(AQW 4173/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the significant interest in the future delivery of Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry –Coleraine railway line. I am committed to addressing regional imbalance and better connecting communities across the North. As you will be aware, I have inherited severe budgetary constraints in my department. Despite these challenges, I can assure you that I am committed to working to find solutions that will deliver for our communities and improve lives. In light of this, I am currently assessing the pressures across my department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the capital budget made available for the period ahead.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure when planning permission will be approved for Casement Park.

(AQW 4174/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials continue to work at pace to progress this application so it can be brought forward for decision upon completion of all statutory processes.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in respect of admissible complaint ACCC/C/2013/90 regarding the River Faughan, and in light of paragraph 56 of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman Investigation Report 17453, whether her Department will now update the United Nations Aarhus Convention's Compliance Committee of its position regarding the conflict between the planning conditions and approved drawings of planning permission A/2008/0408/F.

(AQW 4187/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman Investigation Report 17453 is focussed on the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's complaint handling process and record keeping. While it references a historic planning application, it is not an investigation into the historical planning and legal matters in relation to that application. This application was subject to a previous judicial review, as well as being the basis of a complaint to the Aarhus Convention

Compliance Committee in relation to public participation in environmental decision making. The Committee has yet to deliver its findings.

I understand this case has been fully explored in the judicial review; nonetheless, before I come to any view on this matter, I have asked my officials to seek legal advice.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to progress the Ballynahinch bypass.
(AQW 4211/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While I am currently faced with serious and challenging budget constraints, I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better for our communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland. In this respect, I very much recognise that many in the local community support the provision of a bypass in Ballynahinch.

I will be finalising my budget decisions very soon, balancing the needs to fund essential infrastructure work, promote a green recovery and get other strategic projects underway, within the limited funding made available to my Department.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the adoption of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP); (ii) why BMAP is of material consideration when determining planning applications given the judgement of the Court of Appeal in 2017 that its purported adoption in 2014 was of no force or effect, and that the Draft BMAP in its entirety remains unadopted; and (iii) for her assessment of the future of BMAP and its relevance to planning considerations.
(AQW 4212/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following a challenge of the Court of appeal in 2017 BMAP remains as a draft plan and, as such the draft plan along with representations received to it and the PAC Inquiry reports are all material considerations to be weighted by the decision maker. Existing adopted departmental development plans will remain in place until new council local development plans have been fully adopted.

When processing planning applications, decision makers must have regard to the local development plan and any other material consideration. Draft BMAP therefore will continue to be a material consideration until new council local development plans have been adopted in full by all 5 councils to which the draft BMAP area relates.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline how her Department will (i) address the funding concerns felt by Rural Community Transport Partnerships; and (ii) ensure that appropriate support is given to this service during COVID-19.
(AQW 4229/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the important role that community transport plays and for that reason I have taken a number of steps to support RCTPs during this period. This includes authorising the early release of 2019/20 retentions, and along with Minister Poots, continued payment of Assisted Rural Travel Scheme. In addition to this my officials have issued Interim Letters of Offer to Community Transport Operators for the Quarter 1 period of 2020/21 to help alleviate the cash flow issues they are experiencing as a result of their reduced income during this COVID 19 response period.

The period ahead will continue to be challenging, however I remain committed to working collaboratively and innovatively in an effort to support and help ensure the long term viability of these organisations.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) how she plans to develop the Comber Greenway; (ii) the planned schedule of development; and (iii) the level of investment.
(AQW 4256/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that I have announced the creation of a Walking and Cycling Champion position in my Department with responsibility for spearheading work to deliver safe routes that give people the freedom and confidence to walk and cycle as part of their everyday routine.

Currently, I am considering carefully how I can assist in the development of greenways as part of my vision to enable greater sustainable transport options that connect communities, tackle the impact of climate change and improve lives.

My Department continues to operate under challenging budget constraints and the current COVID-19 emergency has added additional load to that budget. However, as I have indicated, I am keen to take decisions in relation to funding as soon as possible.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following departmental press releases referring to Belfast, Derry and Newry, what active travel initiatives are being considered for the South Antrim constituency to assist in reducing commuter travel to Belfast city centre.
(AQW 4261/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that I have announced the creation of a Walking and Cycling Champion in my Department with responsibility for spearheading work to deliver infrastructure that give people the freedom and confidence to walk and cycle as part of their everyday routine. I have asked officials to look at what is possible, both in the short term – in terms of social distancing – and in the longer term as we emerge from this coronavirus crisis.

I am keen to work with all Councils and stakeholders in the development of safe active travel routes throughout the North and would encourage Councils to liaise with the Walking and Cycling Champion on suggestions for projects in their local areas.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update of the progress on the A5 Western Transport Corridor. (AQW 4287/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A Public Inquiry administered by the Planning Appeals Commission into the A5 Western Transport Corridor scheme, concluded on 13 March 2020. I am awaiting the Inspector's report, which is scheduled for completion in September 2020.

Subject to a favourable outcome from the Public Inquiry and the successful completion of all statutory procedures and environmental assessments, construction work on the first phase of the scheme, Phase 1A from New Buildings to north of Strabane, could commence during 2021.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure why she has not brought forward amending legislation to enable HGV drivers aged 45 and over in Northern Ireland to avail of the one year exemption from the requirement to providing a medical report when renewing their licences, as pertains in the rest of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 4299/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that for many people at this time in particular, having a valid licence allowing them to drive for essential journeys or to ensure they can continue to work, is vital. Replication of the GB approach by my Department is not straight forward as it would require amendment of primary legislation on driver licensing. This amendment would need to be made through Westminster, as one year licences are not provided for in the EU Driving Licence Directive. As such, the amendment would therefore not fall within the competence of the NI Assembly.

However, on the 26 May 2020, I announced plans to extend expiring driving licences. The new arrangements were put in place on 4 June 2020, when the new EU Regulation became law. This means that all driving licences with an expiry date between 1 February and 31 August 2020 will be treated as valid for a further seven months. For some drivers this will remove the requirement to have a medical assessment conducted at this difficult time. This extension will be automatically applied and new licences will not be issued during this period.

This new EU Regulation provides a practical solution to a very real problem and ensures that those in this situation can remain on the road without having to worry about getting a renewal application processed, which for some requires a medical assessment.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether the Coronavirus (COVID-19): safer travel guidance for passengers and the Coronavirus (COVID-19): safer transport guidance for operators, which have been produced by the Department of Transport, are recommended to be followed in Northern Ireland; and (ii) if not, to outline what alternative guidance has been issued by her Department.

(AQW 4321/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) The travel guidance for passengers and operators, issued by the Department for Transport (DfT) applies to England only and therefore is not applicable in Northern Ireland.
- (ii) My Department is in the process of developing safer travel guidance. As part of the process I have issued drafted guidance to the Department of Health and the Department of the Economy for their input given their role and responsibilities. The guidance, which will provide advice to passengers and public transport operators, will be published in support of the Northern Ireland Executive's five-stage coronavirus recovery plan and will be updated as appropriate to reflect the changing situation as we progress through the various stages of the plan.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will progress (i) the A4 Enniskillen bypass project; and (ii) the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen road project.

(AQW 4357/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am currently faced with serious and challenging budget constraints, I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better for our communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland. In this respect, I recognise that many in the local community support the provision of a bypass in Enniskillen and also improvements along the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen route.

I am currently considering budget allocations and competing priorities for capital programmes in 2021/2022.

Department of Justice

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice whether it is legal for non-medical organisations and charities to distribute home abortion pills to women in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 4131/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, presented to Parliament by the UK Government, provide that only medical professionals, as defined in the Regulations, can lawfully provide abortion services. The Regulations establish that it is an offence to intentionally terminate or procure the termination of a pregnancy otherwise than in accordance with the Regulations.

Legislation governing the general control and supply of prescription medicine is a matter for the Department of Health.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice to clarify whether the Northern Ireland Office gave assurances to non-medical groups and charities that they would not face prosecution for distributing abortion pills to women in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 4132/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, presented to Parliament by the UK Government, provide for the circumstances in which an abortion can be lawfully provided in Northern Ireland.

The law on control and supply of prescription medicines is a matter for the Department of Health. Enforcement of this law and prosecutions for breaches are a matter for the appropriate authorities.

I am not aware of any assurances given by the Northern Ireland Office.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what discussions she has had with the Prison Officers Association with regard to implementing workable mental health provisions for serving members of the Northern Ireland Prison Service that does not stigmatise officers.

(AQW 4195/17-22)

Mrs Long: A meeting had been arranged with the Chair of Prison Officers Association (POA) to discuss a range of issues, however this was postponed due to the current COVID19 pandemic. The meeting will be re-arranged in the near future.

Prison Service Management has continued to meet with the POA during the emergency and this will continue through the normal Whitley process.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to engage with the Department for Finance to address the practice whereby prison officers who have taken sick leave due to mental health illnesses are issued with a written warning on their return to work.

(AQW 4196/17-22)

Mrs Long: I very much recognise and appreciate the excellent work prison officers do and the unique context within which they work. While I am committed to supporting prison staff who are ill, I recognise that they are members of the NI Civil Service and are therefore subject, like all civil servants, to the NICS Handbook and the policies and procedures that flow from it.

NICS policies provide for each individual's absence to be considered on merit. Consideration involves examination of a range of factors and includes an opportunity for the individual to make representation on the circumstances of their case before any decision is taken. It is important to note that where a sick warning is issued, the individual has the right of appeal.

I have no plans to engage with the Department of Finance in relation to the application of the NICS Sick Absence Policy within the Prison Service at this time but have asked the Director General to keep the matter under review and report to me any concerns that require my attention.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total financial resources allocated in legal aid in the case R v Gerard Adams.

(AQW 4316/17-22)

Mrs Long: The total legal aid costs of this case before the Court of Appeal was £127,774.19, inclusive of VAT. The costs of the case before the Supreme Court will not be paid by legal aid as those costs fall to be defrayed by the Secretary of State.

Department for the Economy

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy what steps her Department is taking to protect consumers from unsafe and defective electrical products.

(AQW 3479/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): My apologies for the delay in answering this question.

I refer to the answer previously provided for AQW 3480/17-22, which confirmed that Product Safety is a reserved matter, on which the Office for Product Safety & Standards (OPSS) liaises directly with Environmental Health Services in local Councils.

My Department's Trading Standards Service (TSS) is responsible for enforcing the Trade Marks Act 1994, which prohibits the unauthorised use of trademarks as well as the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. Intellectual Property (IP) crime is a priority area for TSS and much of this work focuses on counterfeit products that are also unsafe, such as electrical goods.

TSS, along with its enforcement partners, has issued cease and desist notices, seized goods and prosecuted traders for selling counterfeit electrical products.

Furthermore TSS plays a role in national and international operations to tackle the production, importation, sale and distribution of offending electrical goods. Recent TSS enforcement action included the seizure of thousands of fake and unsafe mobile phone chargers and accessories, hair straighteners and other electrical equipment.

TSS also works with the OPSS, in relation to expert testing of fake products seized during counterfeit investigations where appropriate.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of how the Northern Ireland economy will perform, against the UK average, with the impact of Brexit, given that the independent Office for Budget Responsibility has predicted that the United Kingdom, as a whole, will lose 5.2% from GDP over the next 15 years.

(AQW 3634/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since the Office for Budget Responsibility released these particular forecasts, their suite of economic assessments have effectively been overtaken by events due to the economic crisis and uncertainty that we and the rest of the UK are facing from the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, I want to remain ambitious for our future as we overcome the immediate difficulties ahead faced by businesses and individuals and ultimately want to have a thriving economy that benefits everyone in our society.

Projections for the long term are particularly difficult at this moment in time. The impact of COVID-19 has been devastating for the economy, and the future is unpredictable. A huge amount depends on us navigating a pathway back to some sort of normal, and doing that within the context of the HM Treasury timelines for withdrawal support to the economy nationally.

Historically, the NI economy lags behind the UK economy in terms of economic growth, and within that has a greater reliance on the public sector which has faced significant austerity for around a decade now. In 2019, 1 in 4 employees in NI were within the public sector compared to 1 in 6 across the whole of the UK. I would like to see an increase in private sector jobs and opportunities in NI as part of rebalancing the local economy.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what financial assistance is available for those who are on zero hours contracts, or are self-employed, who find themselves out of work due to the impact of COVID-19, but are not ill themselves.

(AQW 3731/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: For people on zero hour contracts who have seen their income reduced or are out of work, claims for Universal Credit can be made. Further information is available at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/universal-credit>.

For self-employed people, The Department launched the Small Business Support Grant scheme on 26 March 2020 which remained open to 20 May 2020. Self-employed people were eligible for the £10,000 grant if they operate of premises with a Total Net Annual Value (NAV) of £15,000 or below and receive either Small Business Rates Relief or Industrial Derating. Further details on the scheme are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£10000-small-business-support-grant-scheme>.

The Department also launched the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant. Self-employed people were eligible to apply if their business fell into those sectors and had a Total NAV of between £15,001 and £51,000, subject to some exclusions. Details of the scheme are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£25000-retail-hospitality-tourism-and-leisure-grant>.

Self-employed people who employ at least one other person are able to apply for the NI Microbusiness Hardship Fund which launched on 20 May 2020. An Eligibility Checker and the application portal are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-ni-micro-business-hardship-fund>. Applications can be made until 12 June 2020.

Many other means of support are offered on a UK-wide basis. The Chancellor has announced the Self-employed Income Support Scheme. This offers 80% of trading profits up to a maximum of £2,500 per month for 3 months. Other support is available such as Universal Credit, HMRC Time to Pay and Income Tax Deferral. Further details are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/business-support/coronavirus>.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will engage with employers on the need for greater flexibility in terms of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 3759/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges and difficulties for society at large, and the economic impacts are significant.

On 28 March 2020, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced a series of enhanced containment measures, agreed by the Executive, designed to restrict the spread of the Coronavirus. This included the publication of The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. This has been used as a basis for determination of what businesses should continue to operate.

The NI Engagement Forum

In addition, the Executive also established a new NI Engagement Forum, to provide advice and guidance in response to Covid-19 as it impacts on the NI Economy / Labour Market.

This is a unique and very diverse range of stakeholders, drawn from all sectors of the local business and employment community, trades unions, Public Health Agency, Health and Safety Executive, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the Food Standards Agency.

The Forum, under the stewardship of the Labour Relations Agency, has since produced a list of priority sectors and sub-sectors, as well as a new Code of Practice on Safe Working as it applies to the current Covid-19 pandemic. The final agreed Priority sector list and Code of Practice, as agreed by the NI Executive, have been now published on the NI Business Info website: www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk.

The Code of Practice: Working Through This Together – A Practical Guide to Making Work Places Safer, sets out a number of guiding principles which have the full endorsement of the Executive. These include the following:

- During the Covid-19 (Coronavirus) emergency, employees of businesses and organisations permitted to operate should go to work only if they cannot work from home;
- Everyone should approach the health, safety and wellbeing of each other in the workplace with compassion and understanding;
- Employers are advised to have regular and meaningful engagement with their employees and/or their recognised trade union or other representatives (including their health and safety committee, where this exists) about the Covid-19 emergency.

Working from Home

Employers across a range of sectors have demonstrated flexibility during this pandemic, and where it has been possible to retain their staff in meaningful employment from home, this has become the normal and accepted practice. In my own Department for example, with effect from week ending 22nd May 2020, all staff have been provided with the I.T. capacity and capability to work remotely and/or from home.

Obviously, not all types of employment or work activity will be as suited to home working as others. It is for this reason that my Department, and indeed the Executive, have established and entrusted Forums such as the NI Engagement Forum, to discuss and determine what safe working practices are the most appropriate for the respective employment sectors, and the range of work activities within each.

Through the membership of such Forums, which reflect a genuine balance between the needs of the businesses and employers, as well as those of the workforce, I believe that the most sensible, sensitive and environmental specific decisions will be made, enabling a safe and phased approach to a re-opening of many places of work.

I would of course encourage employers to continue to facilitate home working where this is possible, and to put the safety of staff and customers as the top priority as we work collectively to manage and navigate the way forward, hopefully to a time beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

You will be aware that, on 12th May 2020, the Executive announced and published a new phased five-stage plan for slowly moving out of lockdown; 'Coronavirus Executive Approach to Decision Making'. Details, including the dates on which any further relaxations come into effect, will be provided on a regular basis, and the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 will be updated accordingly.

In making such decisions, the Executive Office will be guided by most up-to-date scientific evidence; the ability of the health service to cope; and the wider impacts on our health, society and the economy.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy what help and assistance is being considered and implemented to help self-employed people who have no income due to the lack of work due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

(AQW 3817/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department launched the Small Business Support Grant scheme on 26 March 2020 which remained open to 20 May 2020. Self-employed people were eligible for the £10,000 grant if they operate of premises with a Total Net Annual Value (NAV) of £15,000 or below and receive either Small Business Rates Relief or Industrial Derating. Further details on the scheme are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£10000-small-business-support-grant-scheme>.

The Department also launched the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant. Self-employed people were eligible to apply if their business fell into those sectors and had a Total NAV of between £15,001 and £51,000, subject to some exclusions. Details of the scheme are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£25000-retail-hospitality-tourism-and-leisure-grant>.

Self-employed people who employ at least one other person are able to apply for the NI Microbusiness Hardship Fund which launched on 20 May 2020. An Eligibility Checker and the application portal are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-ni-micro-business-hardship-fund>. Applications can be made until 12 June 2020.

Many other means of support are offered on a UK-wide basis. The Chancellor has announced the Self-employed Income Support Scheme. This offers 80% of trading profits up to a maximum of £2,500 per month for 3 months. Other support is available such as Universal Credit, HMRC Time to Pay and Income Tax Deferral. Further details are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/business-support/coronavirus>.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement she has had with businesses about diversifying to include production of Personal Protection Equipment and hand sanitiser to help meet demand during the COVID-19 crisis.
(AQW 3854/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: At the end of March, the Department of Finance set up a re-purposing work stream with Invest NI and the Department of Health, to assist manufacturers to produce essential PPE and other COVID-19 related products.

Working closely with companies Invest Northern Ireland encouraged companies to register at www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/coronavirus-covid-19-how-your-business-can-help

This work stream has led to a number of products which are now primarily sourced locally including hand sanitisers, face shields and body bags.

In total the NI Executive has ordered products from local manufacturers ranging from;

- local distilleries which are now producing hand sanitisers;
- manufacturers which were producing blinds and are now manufacturing face shields;
- a small company which made industrial and tarpaulin covers which has repurposed to supply body bags for funeral directors.

The local supply chain has been invaluable in the fight against this virus. Our local manufacturers ramped up within a few weeks to ensure we had an adequate local supply of these essential products. Supported by Invest NI, most of these manufacturers are also supplying throughout the UK and Ireland. In addition Invest NI has promoted this important initiative across a range of business organisations and through various media channels, including nibusinessinfo.com, investni.com and Twitter.

At present, Invest NI is working with manufacturers to increase the local capacity of disposable gowns and masks which we will need on an ongoing basis.

The Executive's vision is to have as much of these essential items manufactured locally to ensure we have access to these on a long term basis.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the COVID-19 outbreak, what support her Department will make available to self-employed people.
(AQW 3861/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department launched the Small Business Support Grant scheme on 26 March 2020 which remained open to 20 May 2020. Self-employed people were eligible for the £10,000 grant if they operate of premises with a Total Net Annual Value (NAV) of £15,000 or below and receive either Small Business Rates Relief or Industrial Derating. Further details on the scheme are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£10000-small-business-support-grant-scheme>.

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Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 3019/17-22, for her assessment of the Foyle constituency receiving one of the lowest levels of job creation through direct financial assistance from Invest NI of any constituency in 2016-17, given that it is the constituency with the highest unemployment and economic inactivity in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 3864/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Whilst the job creation performance was disappointing in 2016/17, and I agree more needs to be done to boost economic growth across Northern Ireland, it was also the lowest level of the five years provided. In each of the other years, Foyle performed more strongly when compared to the other areas of Northern Ireland.

Firstly, it is important to remember that Invest NI assistance is demand-led and provided in response to a request for assistance from businesses located across Northern Ireland.

Secondly, when looking at job creation or economic activity at a regional level, it is best to look across a longer period, as activity in any one year can be greatly influenced by individual projects of scale. Looking over a longer time period helps balance out such investments across the period, providing a more reliable comparison.

In the table below, I have outlined Invest NI's activity across Northern Ireland's 18 Parliamentary Constituency Areas for the latest 5 years, for which data is presently available, and have also broken this down per head of adult population in those areas. You will see from below that Foyle is in the top 5 across Northern Ireland in terms of assistance offered, planned investment, assistance offered per head and planned investment per head.

Whilst we agree that more still needs to be done, I can assure you that I, and the wider Executive, are committed to delivering growth across Northern Ireland for all our citizens.

Invest NI Assistance Offered by Constituency Area (2014-15 to 2018-19)

PCA	Adult population (16 years +)	Offers	Assistance Offered £m	Assistance Per Head £	Planned Investment £m	Planned Investment Per Head £
Belfast East	77,563	1,209	55.37	714	341.19	4,399
Belfast North	82,248	862	22.95	279	130.60	1,588
Belfast South	96,613	2,296	122.40	1,267	757.85	7,844
Belfast West	72,666	691	14.20	195	71.76	987
East Antrim	73,600	446	12.88	175	70.22	954
East Londonderry	81,833	673	10.87	133	50.40	616
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	84,336	1,235	31.74	376	199.50	2,366
Foyle	80,633	1,117	45.52	565	271.88	3,372
Lagan Valley	86,772	1,252	37.83	436	179.76	2,072
Mid Ulster	80,113	1,805	39.06	488	258.65	3,229
Newry And Armagh	91,663	1,093	30.41	332	179.11	1,954
North Antrim	89,623	709	24.85	277	117.91	1,316
North Down	74,500	562	8.36	112	39.17	526
South Antrim	81,131	836	52.15	643	226.20	2,788
South Down	88,012	909	18.50	210	130.74	1,485
Strangford	74,655	673	11.01	148	38.75	519
Upper Bann	99,189	1,218	49.76	502	414.74	4,181
West Tyrone	72,981	749	24.13	331	107.93	1,479
Total	1,488,131	18,335	611.99	411	3,586.35	2,410

Notes:

- 1 Assistance Offered relates to the amount of support that Invest NI offered towards a project.
- 2 Total Planned Investment is the amount that the business plans to invest in the local economy as a result of the supported project – this includes Invest NI support offered.
- 3 Invest NI offered an additional £1m of assistance to projects that have not yet determined a location.
- 4 Invest NI revises performance data on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects implemented projects; therefore, the data above may differ to previously published information.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will create a central point of contact where businesses can receive an update on the status of their Coronavirus Business Support Grant applications.

(AQW 4117/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A central point of contact does not exist for the schemes. However, the status of applications can be checked by the following means.

A helpline is available for applicants to the Small Business Support Grant scheme. The helpline number is 0300 200 7809 and is open from Monday to Friday, 9am - 5pm.

For the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant, queries on the status of applications should be sent to Business-Support-Grant-Scheme@economy-ni.gov.uk.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her Department's plans for extending the funding for those on DfE Studentships in light of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 crisis to their PhD study.

(AQW 4147/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is currently considering the case for providing costed extensions to those on DfE Studentships who require them in order to be able to complete their research degree.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what caravan businesses across Northern Ireland have applied for the (i) £10,000; or (ii) £25,000, business support grants.

(AQW 4154/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: For the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant scheme, 42 businesses classified as a Caravan Site or a Caravan/ Camp Site in the Land & Property Services Valuation List have been paid grants as of 26 May 2020, with a further 2 payments expected to be made in the coming days.

For the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant scheme, 29 such businesses have been paid grants as of 26 May 2020.

Further details of recipients of both grant schemes will be made available after all applications are processed.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department is developing a discretionary fund to support those businesses who are unable to access the current financial supports announced as a response to COVID-19.

(AQW 4161/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 28th March 2020, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, announced a series of enhanced containment measures, agreed by the Executive, designed to restrict the spread of the Coronavirus.

In addition, the Executive and the UK Government have since introduced a number of interventions and packages of financial support to help those who have been affected by the consequences of COVID-19. These include but are not limited to the following:

- Business Grants Schemes;
- Self-Employment Income Support Scheme;
- Job Retention Scheme;
- Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme;
- Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme; and
- Relief packages with non-domestic Rates

On 16th May 2020, I announced a new 'Hardship Fund' to help Northern Ireland based micro-businesses and social enterprises who meet the criteria and who have been unable to access other regional and national support measures. My Department will make up to £40 million available through this fund, which is being administered by Invest Northern Ireland.

Details of the Hardship Fund including the eligibility checker have been published on the NI Business Info website: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-ni-micro-business-hardship-fund>

Information on all of current and evolving support options are being updated continuously at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk>. In addition, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, provides advice and guidance for small businesses and organisations experiencing difficulties during this challenging period.

Despite government's best efforts, and the significant funding that has been made available in such a short period of time, I do understand that some businesses, employers, organisations and individuals have been unable to avail of all or some of the support options thus far, nor do I underestimate how difficult a time this is for all concerned.

There are no plans at this time to set up an additional Discretionary Fund at this time, however, I can assure you that I, along with my Executive colleagues, continue to examine and pursue further means to support the local economy in whatever way possible.

Most recently, the Finance Minister announced on 19th May 2020 additional help with paying Non Domestic Rates including an extended rates holiday for the sectors hardest hit by this pandemic.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy whether the sole employee of a business who is the company director or owner of that business, and is not paid through PAYE, is able to access the NI Micro-Business Hardship Fund.

(AQW 4162/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A key criteria for eligibility of the NI Micro-Business Hardship Fund is that, at 29 February 2020, the business must have employed between one and nine employees paid via PAYE. Businesses where the sole employee is the business owner or company director are not eligible for this scheme.

A full list of eligibility criteria can be found at: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/node/23445>

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy what steps her Department has taken to support students in financial hardship and who are being threatened with court proceedings by their landlords.

(AQW 4168/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Each year my Department makes available £2.8m of funding for higher education students who experience financial hardship in the course of their studies. In addition, I have recently secured a further £1.4m of funding from the Executive, giving a total of £4.2m available in this financial year.

My Department has no remit to intervene in legal contracts relating to property rental.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether it is accepted that the tariff option brought forward by the Department after the 2018 consultation on the future of the Renewable Heat Incentive was not one of the 8 options proposed in the consultation document; and (ii) to detail why this was the case.

(AQW 4205/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The tariff option brought forward was a variant of Option 4 in the consultation. The Policy Summary document which explains this decision remains available on the Department's website at the link below:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/RHI-non-domestic-future-policy-summary.pdf>

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she is satisfied that there is no conflict in Cornwall-Insight being involved in the new consultation on Renewable Heat Incentives, given they have previously published an article referring to the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme as money for nothing; (ii) whether a formal complaint has been made and registered; and (iii) what is the impact on the validity of the ongoing consultation.

(AQW 4206/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i) I am satisfied that there is no conflict.
- ii) A complaint has been received, recorded and responded to.
- iii) This does not impact the consultation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether there are elements of a biomass heating system that are deemed essential for the operation of a biomass system in Great Britain which her Department considers should not be considered as additional capital spend for participants in the Department for the Economy's Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme, and, if so, why.

(AQW 4207/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Ofgem's guidance for both the NI Non-Domestic RHI and the equivalent scheme in Great Britain provide lists of integral equipment usually included in the definition of "eligible installations" for solid biomass plant. These lists are the same.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has received a credible explanation as to why Cornwall-Insight relied on the cost of domestic volumes of kerosene, rather than the cost of commercial volumes, in advising on a suitable tariff.

(AQW 4209/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Section 3.4.6 of the Cornwall Insight Tariff Review Report explains the approach.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 3606/17-22, why this question could be answered by a previous Minister, as demonstrated by the response to AQW 2963/11-15.

(AQW 4226/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As stated in my answer to AQW 3606/17-22, my Department does not collate information relating to the religious background of staff employed by Northern Ireland's higher education institutions.

Previous Ministers may have asked officials to request the information from the institutions on your behalf.

However, it may be quicker for you to request the information from the institutions directly.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy, given the information in the EirGrid Group Annual Report 2019, where they state that the group has delivered a €4 million dividend to the Exchequer of the Republic of Ireland, to; (i) detail what sum of that dividend originated from Northern Ireland bill payers and tax payers; (ii) detail what monies were given through System Operator Northern Ireland (SONI) paying EirGrid under the Service Agreements; and (iii) detail how this is itemised showing accountability, value for money and the exact services that are actually paid for.

(AQW 4254/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Elements of this question do not fall within my ministerial responsibility, as detailed below, and I will therefore not be able to provide an answer:

- (i) The Department for the Economy does not have any insight into how the EirGrid Group formulates its dividends and therefore would not be in a position to comment on the contribution to that dividend which originated from NI bill payers or tax payers.
- (ii) & (iii) The operations of the Transmission System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI), including any service agreements with EirGrid, are licenced and regulated by the Utility Regulator for Northern Ireland. The Utility Regulator operates independently and the Department for the Economy has no oversight role in its operations. You may wish to raise these matters directly with the Utility Regulator.

Domestic electricity consumers in Northern Ireland enjoy the lowest electricity prices in these islands and among the lowest in Europe. This is a clear indication of the success of the Single Electricity Market arrangements that were introduced in 2007 and upgraded in October 2018. You will be aware that the regulated electricity tariff is also due to be reduced by 4.8% on 1 July. I am satisfied that local consumers are well served by the current arrangements as evidenced by the relative costs of electricity here and in neighbouring jurisdictions.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what input or correspondence has the Department had with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' Marine Licensing in regards to the proposed Islandmagee Gas Storage Project; and (ii) whether she will publish this information.

(AQW 4322/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My Department has had a number of calls, meetings, and correspondence with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Marine Licensing about the Islandmagee gas storage project which have focused on the marine licensing proposals and decommissioning and residual liability issues. The Department for the Economy also provided input to DAERA's consultation on the project's application for a marine licence.
- (ii) There are no plans to publish this information, however, my Department's input to DAERA's consultation on a marine licence for the project may be published on that Department's website in due course.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what support her Department is providing to further education colleges to continue operations and adapt to COVID-19.

(AQW 4325/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: For the 2020/21 period, my Department has already allocated a resource budget of £209.95 million to the Further Education sector, representing over 25% of the Department's resource budget. The allocation includes £22.8 million of additional funding to colleges this year.

Further capital investment of circa £35m in the current financial year, will enable colleges to address the COVID-19 impact and deliver state-of-the-art accommodation in line with the planned capital works programme. This will also fund essential equipment to deliver critical skills for the Northern Ireland economy and achieve the strategic outcomes which I and the Executive have set.

In addition, in order to address the many challenges arising from COVID-19, my officials are working closely with all six colleges and other key stakeholders, on a number of key strategic and operational matters. These include planning for a return to safe on-site delivery and a more normalised working environment essential to a large cohort of diverse FE learners and vocational and technical education, the completion of the 2019/20 student assessment/qualification process and, reducing the administrative burden on colleges until the emergency eases.

A Learner Support Working Group has also been established to identify what additional support is being provided for all learners including vulnerable learners and review approaches to date.

I will continue to consider the specific impacts of COVID-19 on the colleges within the context of the Executive's overall approach to managing the emergency.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for the Economy whether she would support the provision of special paid leave for victims of domestic abuse.

(AQW 4353/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have been made aware of this issue by Minister Long.

As such I have asked my officials to give consideration to it alongside a range of other employment related issues as part of a longer term vision for employment relations in Northern Ireland.

I am sympathetic to the needs of victims of domestic abuse.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 28 April 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed a two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Assembly Business

The Principal Deputy Speaker offered condolences to former Members of the Assembly who had recently suffered bereavement, and paid his own tribute to the recently deceased father of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots. Mr Poots made a brief response to the tribute.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Consideration Stage: Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22)

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, moved the Consideration Stage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill.

Fourteen amendments were tabled to the Bill.

The sitting was suspended at 10.46am to enable Members to observe a minute's silence in honour of frontline healthcare workers who have lost their lives to coronavirus.

The sitting resumed at 11.01am, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

Clauses

After debate, Amendment 1 to Clause 1 was **negatived** without division.

After debate, Amendment 2 to Clause 1 was **negatived** without division.

After debate, Amendment 3 to Clause 1 was **negatived** without division.

As Amendment 3 was not made, Amendment 4 was not called.

As Amendment 3 was not made, Amendment 5 was not called.

As Amendment 3 was not made, Amendment 6 was not called.

After debate, Amendment 7 to Clause 1 was **negatived** without division.

As Amendment 7 was not made, Amendment 8 was not called.

After debate, Amendment 9 to Clause 2 was **negatived** without division.

As Amendment 9 was not made, Amendment 10 was not called.

As Amendment 9 was not made, Amendment 11 was not called.

As Amendment 12 was not made, Amendment 12 was not called.

After debate, Amendment 13 to Clause 2 was **negatived** on division.

The question being put, it was agreed without division that Clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was agreed without division that Clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 14 inserting a new Clause 2A was not moved.

The question being put, it was agreed without division that Clause 3 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was agreed without division that Clauses 4 to 6 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, it was agreed without division that the Long Title stand part of the Bill.

Bill NIA 04/17-22 stood referred to the Speaker.

3.2 Second Stage – The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings) Bill (NIA 3/17-22)

Minister of Justice

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, moved the Second Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA 3/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with Deputy Speaker Beggs in the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Second Stage – The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA 3/17-22) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA 3/17-22) passed Second Stage.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4.2 Final Stage – The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22)

Minister for Communities

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, moved that the Final Stage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22) do now pass.

Debate ensued.

The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22) passed Final Stage.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.47pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

28 April 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

28 April 2020

Division

The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (Amendment 13)

Proposed:

In clause 2, page 2, line 22, leave out “are subject to negative resolution” and insert:

‘may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly’.

Mr Gerry Carroll

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 30

Noes: 53

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr Muir, Mr Nesbitt, Mr O’Toole, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler, Mr Carroll.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Mrs Dodds, Ms Dolan, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Ms Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buckley, Ms Ennis.

The Amendment was **negatived**.

The following Members’ votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley [Teller, Noes], Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler [Teller, Ayes] voted for Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Durkan voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Dallat, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty and Mr O’Toole.

Mr O’Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis [Teller, Noes], Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mrs O’Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

22 April 2020 – 28 April 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

North South Language Body 2017 Annual Report and Accounts (Department for Communities)

Legislative Consent Memorandum - Sentencing (Pre-Consolidation Amendments) Bill (Department of Justice)

Reducing Costs in the PSNI (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/67 The Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Communities)

SR 2020/68 Working Time (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/69 The Maternity Allowance and Statutory Maternity Pay (Normal Weekly Earnings etc.) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/70 The Statutory Paternity Pay, Statutory Adoption Pay and Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Normal Weekly Earnings etc.) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/71 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/72 The Planning (Development Management) (Temporary Modifications) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Minister for Infrastructure - DVA Lifts Audit

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation for Non-Domestic RHI Tariff Review 2020 (Department for the Economy)

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 28 April 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	27/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20						
The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	

2017-2022 Mandate

Non-Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)	03/02/20	16/03/20						

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 28 April 2020:

Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
John Blair	Gordon Lyons
Cathal Boylan	Séan Lynch
Maurice Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Sinéad Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradshaw	Fra McCann
Thomas Buchanan	Daniel McCrossan
Jonathan Buckley	Patsy McGlone
Joanne Bunting	Colin McGrath
Pat Catney	Philip McGuigan
Trevor Clarke	Maolíosa McHugh
John Dallat	Michelle McIlveen
Stewart Dickson	Sinead McLaughlin
Linda Dillon	Justin McNulty
Diane Dodds	Andrew Muir
Jemma Dolan	Karen Mullan
Gordon Dunne	Conor Murphy
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Paul Frew	Matthew O'Toole
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
William Humphrey	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Catherine Kelly	Peter Weir
Dolores Kelly	Rachel Woods

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 5 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Assembly Business

The Principal Deputy Speaker recorded formally the Assembly's condolences to those families bereaved by COVID-19 since its last meeting, and recorded the Assembly's admiration and appreciation for all who are working on the front line to try to prevent further loss of life.

Committee Business

The Principal Deputy Speaker advised Members that the Speaker had received notification of the resignation of Mr Mike Nesbitt as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office with immediate effect, and that the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party had informed the Speaker that Mr Doug Beattie had been nominated as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office, also with immediate effect. Mr Beattie accepted the nomination, and the Speaker was satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders had been met.

Royal Assent

The Principal Deputy Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 4 May 2020 to the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.

3. Assembly Business

Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A

Proposed:

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 10 June 2020.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Statement – COVID-19

The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, made a statement regarding COVID-19, following which she replied to questions.

4.2 Statement – School Enhancement Programme

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, made a statement regarding the School Enhancement Programme, following which he replied to questions.

4.3 Motion: The draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.01pm, with Deputy Speaker Beggs in the Chair.

5. Speaker's Business

John Dallat MLA

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, informed Members of the passing of Mr John Dallat MLA and, on behalf of the Assembly, expressed condolences to Mr Dallat's family. The Deputy Speaker also informed Members that arrangements would be set in place for formal tributes to be paid to Mr Dallat at the start of the next sitting.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)**6.1 Motion: The draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)**

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

6.2 Motion: The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Minister of Finance

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

6.3 Motion: Budget 2020 - 21**Proposed:**

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2020-2021 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 31 March 2020 and the further detailed information laid on 30 April 2020.

Minister of Finance

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 4.18pm.

The sitting resumed at 4.35pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support (Division).

7. Committee Business

7.1 **Motion: Extension of Committee Stage – Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 1/17-22)**

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 02 December 2020, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 1/17-22).

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 7.10pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

5 May 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

5 May 2020

Division

Budget 2020 - 21

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2020-2021 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 31 March 2020 and the further detailed information laid on 30 April 2020.

Minister of Finance

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 76

Noes: 4

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer.

NOES

Unionist

Mr Allister

Other

Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Total Votes	80	Total Ayes	76	[95.0%]
Nationalist Votes	37	Nationalist Ayes	37	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	34	Unionist Ayes	33	[97.1%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	6	[66.7%]

The motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch [Teller, Ayes], Mr McAleer [Teller, Ayes], Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods [Teller, Noes].

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

29 April 2020 – 5 May 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

2020-21 Budget (Department of Finance)

5. Assembly Reports

Report on the Legislative Consent Motion – Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill (NIA 18/17-22) (Committee for Justice)

Report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Pensions Schemes Bill (NIA 19/17-22) (Committee for Communities)

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Eighth Report of Session 2019 – 2020 (NIA 20/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/73 The Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/74 The Local Government (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of District Council Meetings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/75 The Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/76 The Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed Costs) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/77 The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 5 May 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	27/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20						
The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20

2017-2022 Mandate

Non-Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)	03/02/20	16/03/20						

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 5 May 2020:

Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
John Blair	Gordon Lyons
Cathal Boylan	Séan Lynch
Maurice Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Sinéad Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradshaw	Fra McCann
Thomas Buchanan	Daniel McCrossan
Jonathan Buckley	Patsy McGlone
Joanne Bunting	Philip McGuigan
Pat Catney	Maoliosa McHugh
Trevor Clarke	Michelle McIlveen
John Dallat	Sinead McLaughlin
Stewart Dickson	Justin McNulty
Linda Dillon	Andrew Muir
Diane Dodds	Karen Mullan
Jemma Dolan	Conor Murphy
Gordon Dunne	Robin Newton
Mark Durkan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Alex Easton	Michelle O'Neill
Sinéad Ennis	Matthew O'Toole
Arlene Foster	Edwin Poots
Paul Frew	George Robinson
Órlaithí Flynn	Emma Rogan
Colm Gildernew	Pat Sheehan
Paul Givan	Emma Sheerin
Deirdre Hargey	Christopher Stalford
Harry Harvey	John Stewart
David Hilditch	Mervyn Storey
William Humphrey	Robin Swann
William Irwin	Peter Weir
Declan Kearney	Rachel Woods
Catherine Kelly	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Mr John Dallat MLA

The Principal Deputy Speaker informed the Assembly that the planned formal tributes to the late Mr John Dallat, Member for East Londonderry, were postponed until a later date to provide the opportunity for the Dallat family to be present. The Principal Deputy Speaker also recorded the Speaker's appreciation to the SDLP and to the Dallat family for how they have approached this sensitive matter, given the wider restrictions at the present time.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 18A(5)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 18A(5) be suspended for 12 May 2020.

*Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Robbie Butler
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey*

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Motion: The Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Minister for Infrastructure

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

The sitting was suspended at 11.24am.

The sitting resumed at 11.35am, with Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

4.2 Statement – The Executive's Approach to Coronavirus Decision-Making

The First Minister, the Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, and the deputy First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a joint statement to the Assembly regarding The Executive's Approach to Coronavirus Decision-Making, following which they replied to questions.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 1.33pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

12 May 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

6 May 2020 – 12 May 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Ninth Report of Session 2019 – 2020 (NIA 22/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/78 The Children's Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children's Social Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/79 The Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.5) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 12 May 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	11/06/20					
The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20

2017-2022 Mandate

Non-Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 12 May 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 12 May 2020:

Martina Anderson	Dolores Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Gerry Kelly
Clare Bailey	Liz Kimmins
John Blair	Naomi Long
Cathal Boylan	Gordon Lyons
Maurice Bradley	Séan Lynch
Paula Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradshaw	Declan McAleer
Thomas Buchanan	Fra McCann
Jonathan Buckley	Daniel McCrossan
Joanne Bunting	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Philip McGuigan
Trevor Clarke	Maoliosa McHugh
Stewart Dickson	Michelle McIlveen
Linda Dillon	Sinead McLaughlin
Diane Dodds	Justin McNulty
Jemma Dolan	Andrew Muir
Gordon Dunne	Karen Mullan
Mark Durkan	Conor Murphy
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Paul Frew	Matthew O'Toole
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
William Humphrey	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir
Catherine Kelly	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 19 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Constituency Vacancy

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, advised that the Speaker had notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with the Northern Ireland Act 1998, that a vacancy exists in the East Londonderry constituency, following the death of Mr John Dallat.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Matthew O'Toole be appointed as a member of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Colin McGrath

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Statement – COVID-19 Response

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, made a statement regarding the response to COVID-19, following which she replied to questions.

4.2 Statement – COVID-19: Update on the Financial Position

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement regarding COVID-19: Update on the Financial Position, following which he replied to questions.

4.3 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.02pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4.4 Motion: The Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

4.5 Legislative Consent Motion: Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill to Northern Ireland.

Minister of Justice

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.10pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

19 May 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

13 May 2020 – 19 May 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Agricultural Wages Order (Amendment) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
 - Legislative Consent Memorandum for the Birmingham Commonwealth Games Bill (Department of Justice)
5. Assembly Reports
 - Committee for Justice Report on the Legislative Consent Motion – Sentencing (Pre-Consolidation Amendments) Bill (NIA 21/17-22) (Committee for Justice)
 - Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Tenth Report of Session 2019 – 2020 (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules
 - SR 2020/80 The Food Information (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)
 - SR 2020/81 The Direct Payments to Farmers Single Application Amendment Date (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
 - SR 2020/82 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 - 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report (Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
 - Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties Notice (No.4) 2020 (Department of Education)
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 19 May 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	11/06/20					
The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20

2017-2022 Mandate

Non-Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 19 May 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 19 May 2020:

Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
John Blair	Naomi Long
Cathal Boylan	Gordon Lyons
Maurice Bradley	Séan Lynch
Paula Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradshaw	Declan McAleer
Thomas Buchanan	Fra McCann
Jonathan Buckley	Daniel McCrossan
Joanne Bunting	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Philip McGuigan
Trevor Clarke	Maolíosa McHugh
Stewart Dickson	Michelle McIlveen
Linda Dillon	Sinead McLaughlin
Diane Dodds	Justin McNulty
Jemma Dolan	Andrew Muir
Gordon Dunne	Karen Mullan
Mark Durkan	Conor Murphy
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Paul Frew	Matthew O'Toole
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
William Humphrey	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir
Catherine Kelly	Rachel Woods
Dolores Kelly	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 26 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 New Member

The Principal Deputy Speaker informed Members of notification from the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Cara Hunter had been returned as a Member for the East Londonderry constituency.

Ms Hunter gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive on 19 May 2020.

3. Matter of the Day

3.1 Failure to Deliver a Pension for Victims of the Troubles

Mr Jim Allister made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the Failure to Deliver a Pension for Victims of the Troubles. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Patsy McGlone replace Mr Pat Catney as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs; and that Ms Sinead Bradley replace Mr Patsy McGlone as a member of the Committee for Justice.

*Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Colin McGrath*

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement – COVID-19 Response

The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, made a statement regarding the response to COVID-19, following which she replied to questions.

5.2 Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates Further Vote on Account 2020-2021**Proposed:**

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £8,225,189,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £9,050,940,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Column 4 of Table 1, and Column 4 of Table 2, in the Northern Ireland Estimates Further Vote on Account 2020-2021 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 May 2020.

The Minister of Finance

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion on the further Vote on Account 2020-2021 was carried with cross-community support.

5.3 First Stage: Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 5/17-22)

A Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of a certain sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2021; to appropriate that sum for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of that sum; and to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for that year.

The Budget Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be published.

The Deputy Speaker informed the Assembly that the Office of the Speaker had received correspondence from the Committee for Finance stating that, in these extenuating circumstances, the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill has been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2).

5.4 First Stage: Housing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 6/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, on behalf of the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, introduced a Bill to amend the law relating to housing associations; and for connected purposes.

The Housing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 6/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be published.

5.5 Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 42(5)**Proposed:**

That Standing Order 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill 2020.

Minister of Finance

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

The sitting was suspended at 3.53pm.

The sitting resumed at 4.06pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

6. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

6.1 Interim Advocate's Office: Data Breach

The First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Jim Allister.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

7. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

7.1 Second Stage Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 5/17-22)

Minister of Finance

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 5/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 7.39pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

26 May 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

20 May 2020 – 26 May 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22)
 - The Housing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties Notice (No.6) 2020 (Department of Education)
 - Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Bill – Legislative Consent Memorandum (Department of Justice)
 - Domestic Abuse Bill – Legislative Consent Memorandum (Department of Justice)
 - Further Vote on Account 2020-21 (Department of Finance)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - SR 2020/84 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)
 - SR 2020/86 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No.4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)
 - SR 2020/87 The Social Security (Coronavirus) (Electronic Communications) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Consultation on Amendment of the Horse Racing (Northern Ireland) Order 1990 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
 - Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland Corporate Plan 2020-23 and Business Plan 2020-21 (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

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Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 26 May 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	11/06/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/				
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20		/	/				

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 26 May 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 26 May 2020:

Martina Anderson	Dolores Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Gerry Kelly
Clare Bailey	Liz Kimmins
John Blair	Naomi Long
Cathal Boylan	Gordon Lyons
Maurice Bradley	Séan Lynch
Paula Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradshaw	Declan McAleer
Thomas Buchanan	Fra McCann
Jonathan Buckley	Daniel McCrossan
Joanne Bunting	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Philip McGuigan
Trevor Clarke	Maolíosa McHugh
Stewart Dickson	Michelle McIlveen
Linda Dillon	Sinead McLaughlin
Diane Dodds	Justin McNulty
Jemma Dolan	Andrew Muir
Gordon Dunne	Karen Mullan
Mark Durkan	Conor Murphy
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Paul Frew	Matthew O'Toole
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
William Humphrey	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir
Catherine Kelly	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 1 June 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matter of the Day

2.1 Death of George Floyd

Mr Gerry Carroll made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the Death of George Floyd. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Consideration Stage – Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was agreed without division that Clauses 1 to 4 stand part of the Bill.

Schedules

The question being put, it was agreed without division that Schedules 1 and 2 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was agreed without division.

The Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22) stood referred to the Speaker.

3.2 Motion: Accelerated Passage – The Housing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)

Proposed:

That the Housing (Amendment) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was carried with cross-community support (Division).

3.3 Second Stage: The Housing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, moved the Second Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The Housing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22) passed Second Stage.

Deputy Speaker Beggs took the Chair

3.4 Motion: The Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019**Proposed:**

That the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Minister for Communities

Motion: The Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019**Proposed:**

That the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Minister for Communities

A single debate ensued on the two motions.

The Question being put, the motion on the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 was carried.

The Question being put, the motion on the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 was carried.

3.5 Legislative Consent Motion: Pension Schemes Bill**Proposed:**

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Pension Schemes Bill dealing with collective money purchase benefits, the Pensions Regulator, pensions dashboards and further provision relating to pension schemes as contained in clauses 52 to 102, 117, 120 and 128 of, and Schedules 4 to 6, 8, 9 and 11 to, the Bill as introduced in the House of Lords, to Northern Ireland.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

4. Private Members' Business**4.1 Motion: Planning a Just Economic Recovery after the COVID-19 Crisis****Proposed:**

That this Assembly recognises the unprecedented impact the COVID-19 global pandemic is having on our society and economy; commends the invaluable contribution made by our front-line workers who have provided vital service, selflessly, throughout this pandemic; believes that a fair and just economic recovery strategy is required in the aftermath of this crisis; agrees that an economic recovery strategy must not only recognise but also demonstrate that we value our front-line workers and want to protect them, and the most vulnerable, through any impending recession; understands that workers' rights, and public services must be protected; and commits to existing economic challenges being tackled by a just transition to a more high-skilled, regionally balanced and sustainable economy which works for workers, their families, and businesses; and calls on the Executive to ensure that these principles underpin an economic and society-wide recovery.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Colm Gildernew

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Mr Declan McAleer

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'fair' and insert:

“, just and green economic recovery strategy is required in the aftermath of this crisis; agrees that an economic recovery strategy must not only recognise but also demonstrate that we value our front-line workers and want to protect them, and the most vulnerable, through any impending recession; understands that workers' rights and public

services must be protected; commits to existing economic challenges being tackled by a just and green transition to a more high-skilled, regionally balanced and sustainable economy which works for workers, their families, and businesses; and calls on the Executive to ensure that these principles underpin an economic and society-wide recovery guided by a social partnership approach involving government, Trade Unions, businesses and the Third Sector.”

Mr Andrew Muir

Mr John Blair

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was made.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was carried.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.37pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

1 June 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

1 June 2020

Division

Motion: Accelerated Passage – The Housing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)

Proposed:

That the Housing (Amendment) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Minister for Communities

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 68

Noes: 15

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Buckley, Mr Gildernew.

NOES

Nationalist

Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole.

Unionist

Mr Allister.

Other

M Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Durkan, Ms McLaughlin

Total Votes	83	Total Ayes	68	[81.9%]
Nationalist Votes	37	Nationalist Ayes	26	[70.3%]
Unionist Votes	36	Unionist Ayes	35	[97.2%]
Other Votes	10	Other Ayes	7	[70.0%]

The motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley [Teller, Ayes], Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan [Teller, Noes], Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin [Teller, Noes], Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew [Teller, Ayes], Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Miss Woods voted for Ms Bailey.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

27 May 2020 – 1 June 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Medicines and Medical Devices Bill - Legislative Consent Memorandum (Department of Health)

Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill – Legislative Consent Memorandum (Department for the Economy)

The Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation (Amendment 2020) Scheme (2009) (Department of Justice)

5. Assembly Reports

Committee for the Economy Report on the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill Legislative Consent Memorandum (NIA 23/17-22) (Committee for the Economy)

Committee for Justice Report on the Birmingham Commonwealth Games Bill Legislative Consent Memorandum (NIA 26/17-22) (Committee for Justice)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/88 The Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/89 The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No..4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

For Information only

SR 2020/31 The Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (for information only) (Department for Infrastructure)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on Further Education Support and Charging Policy at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

PROXY VOTING NOTICES – MONDAY 1 JUNE 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 1 June 2020:

Martina Anderson	Catherine Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Dolores Kelly
Clare Bailey	Gerry Kelly
John Blair	Liz Kimmins
Cathal Boylan	Naomi Long
Maurice Bradley	Gordon Lyons
Paula Bradley	Séan Lynch
Sinéad Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradshaw	Nichola Mallon
Thomas Buchanan	Declan McAleer
Jonathan Buckley	Fra McCann
Joanne Bunting	Daniel McCrossan
Pat Catney	Patsy McGlone
Trevor Clarke	Philip McGuigan
Stewart Dickson	Maolíosa McHugh
Linda Dillon	Michelle McIlveen
Diane Dodds	Sinead McLaughlin
Jemma Dolan	Justin McNulty
Gordon Dunne	Andrew Muir
Mark Durkan	Karen Mullan
Alex Easton	Conor Murphy
Sinéad Ennis	Robin Newton
Arlene Foster	Carál Ní Chuilín
Paul Frew	Michelle O'Neill
Órlaithí Flynn	Matthew O'Toole
Colm Gildernew	Edwin Poots
Paul Givan	George Robinson
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Rogan
Harry Harvey	Pat Sheehan
David Hilditch	Emma Sheerin
William Humphrey	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 2 June 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 **Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

2.2 **Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

A single debate on both motions ensued.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was carried.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was carried.

2.3 **Legislative Consent Motion: Sentencing (Pre-Consolidation Amendments) Bill**

Proposed:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the relevant provisions of the Sentencing (Pre-Consolidation Amendments) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 21 January 2020, relating to the transfer of community orders, youth rehabilitation orders and suspended sentence orders imposed by the courts in England and Wales to Northern Ireland, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

Minister of Justice

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried

2.4 Legislative Consent Motion: Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees to amendments to Northern Ireland's insolvency and company legislation to assist companies and mutuals in financial difficulties, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, being included in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill as introduced in the House of Commons.

Minister for the Economy

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.02pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

2.5 Further Consideration Stage: Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 5/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker informed the Assembly that, having taken advice on the Bill after Consideration Stage, and, as there were no amendments tabled to the Bill today, the Speaker was content that Budget (No. 2) Bill NIA 05/17-22 could properly proceed to its Final Stage in accordance with the requirements of Standing Order 39 and section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

2.6 Final Stage: Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 5/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved that the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 5/17-22) do now pass.

Debate ensued.

The Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 5/17-22) passed Final Stage with cross-community support.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

3. Committee Business

3.1 Motion: Extension of Committee Stage – Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 15 October 2020, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22).

Chairperson, Committee for Justice

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion: Extension of the EU Withdrawal Transition Period

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes its unique role as a named party to the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement and the unique impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland; further notes the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and the extreme challenges facing businesses and workers; and calls on the UK Government to request, and the European Union to agree, an extension of the current Brexit transition period beyond 31 December 2020 in order that businesses have adequate time to prepare for the implementation of new arrangements.

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Colin McGrath

Ms Sinead McLaughlin

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'facing' and insert:

"all sections of society and the economy; and calls on the UK Government to request, and the European Union to agree, an extension of the current Brexit transition period beyond 31 December 2020 in order that Northern Ireland is given adequate time to rebuild and prepare for the implementation of new arrangements."

Miss Rachel Woods

Ms Clare Bailey

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was made (Division 1).

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was carried.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

4.2 Motion: Abortion Legislation: Non-Fatal Disabilities

Proposed:

That this Assembly welcomes the important intervention of disability campaigner Heidi Crowter and rejects the imposition of abortion legislation which extends to all non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome.

Mr Paul Givan

Ms Joanne Bunting

Ms Michelle McIlveen

Mrs Pam Cameron

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'rejects' and insert:

'the specific legislative provision in the abortion legislation which goes beyond fatal foetal abnormalities to include non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome.'

Ms Emma Sheerin

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Colm Gildernew

Mr Pat Sheehan

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was negatived (Division 2).

The Question being put, the motion was carried (Division 3).

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.07pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

2 June 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

2 June 2020

Division 1

Extension of the EU Withdrawal Transition Period (Amendment)

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'facing' and insert:

"all sections of society and the economy; and calls on the UK Government to request, and the European Union to agree, an extension of the current Brexit transition period beyond 31 December 2020 in order that Northern Ireland is given adequate time to rebuild and prepare for the implementation of new arrangements."

Miss Rachel Woods

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 50

Noes: 38

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Ms Sugden, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McLaughlin, Mr O'Toole.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken, Mr Buckley

The Amendment was **made**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley [Teller, Noes], Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin [Teller, Ayes], Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole [Teller, Ayes].

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Miss Woods voted for Ms Bailey.

Northern Ireland Assembly

2 June 2020

Division 2

Abortion Legislation: Non-Fatal Disabilities (Amendment)

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'rejects' and insert:

'the specific legislative provision in the abortion legislation which goes beyond fatal foetal abnormalities to include non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome.'

Ms Emma Sheerin

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Colm Gildernew

Mr Pat Sheehan

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 32

Noes: 52

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald, Ms Sheerin.

NOES

Mr Allister, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Blair, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Miss McIlveen, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Mr Newton, Mr O'Toole, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Barton, Ms Bunting

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Durkan, Ms Mallon, Mr Nesbitt

The Amendment **fell**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting [Teller, Noes], Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald [Teller, Ayes], Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin [Teller, Ayes].

Miss Woods voted for Ms Bailey.

Northern Ireland Assembly

2 June 2020

Division 3

Abortion Legislation: Non-Fatal Disabilities

Proposed:

That this Assembly welcomes the important intervention of disability campaigner Heidi Crowter and rejects the imposition of abortion legislation which extends to all non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome.

Mr Paul Givan

Ms Joanne Bunting

Ms Michelle McIlveen

Mrs Pam Cameron

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 46

Noes: 40

AYES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Barton, Ms Bunting.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Ms Sugden, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Archibald, Ms Sheerin.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Ms Hunter.

The motion was **carried**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting [Teller, Ayes], Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald [Teller, Noes], Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin [Teller, Noes].

Miss Woods voted for Ms Bailey.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

2 June 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - SR 2020/91 The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)
 - SR 2020/92 The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 2 June 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/				

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 2 June 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 2 June 2020:

Martina Anderson	Catherine Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Dolores Kelly
Clare Bailey	Gerry Kelly
John Blair	Liz Kimmins
Cathal Boylan	Naomi Long
Maurice Bradley	Gordon Lyons
Paula Bradley	Séan Lynch
Sinéad Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradshaw	Nichola Mallon
Thomas Buchanan	Declan McAleer
Jonathan Buckley	Fra McCann
Joanne Bunting	Daniel McCrossan
Pat Catney	Patsy McGlone
Trevor Clarke	Philip McGuigan
Stewart Dickson	Maoliosa McHugh
Linda Dillon	Michelle McIlveen
Diane Dodds	Sinead McLaughlin
Jemma Dolan	Justin McNulty
Gordon Dunne	Andrew Muir
Mark Durkan	Karen Mullan
Alex Easton	Conor Murphy
Sinéad Ennis	Robin Newton
Arlene Foster	Carál Ní Chuilín
Paul Frew	Michelle O'Neill
Órlaithí Flynn	Matthew O'Toole
Colm Gildernew	Edwin Poots
Paul Givan	George Robinson
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Rogan
Harry Harvey	Pat Sheehan
David Hilditch	Emma Sheerin
William Humphrey	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir